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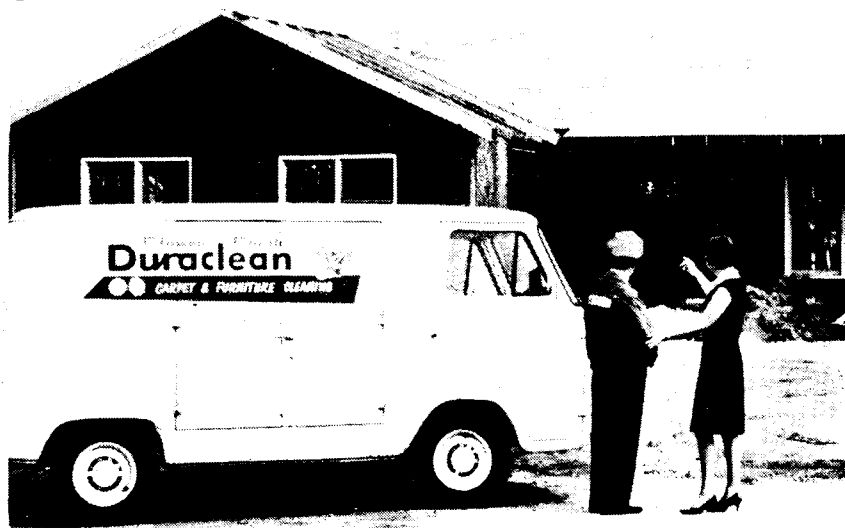
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a **NERO WOLFE** short novel by

REX STOUT

complete in this issue

Peter Vassos came to the old brownstone on West 35th Street three times a week to shine Nero Wolfe's and Archie Goodwin's shoes. Pete the bootblack was a friend. So when Pete seemed to be involved, even implicated, in a possible murder, he had a powerful friend to help him—Nero Wolfe, the famous orchid fancier and fancy orchestrator (of clues and suspects).

It has been said, supposedly by Madame de Sévigné, that no man is a hero to his valet. But in this instance Nero was a hero to his bootblack. In fact, Nero Wolfe was "the greatest man in the world" to Pete Vassos . . .

KILL NOW — PAY LATER

by **REX STOUT**

That Monday morning Pete didn't give me his usual polite grin, contrasting the white gleam of his teeth with the maple-syrup shade of the skin of his square leathery face. He did give me his usual greeting, "Hi-ho, Mr. Goodwin," but with no grin in his voice either, and he ignored the established fact that I expected to take his cap and jacket and put them on the rack. By the time I turned from shutting the door he had drop-

ped his jacket on the hall bench and was picking up his box, which he had put on the floor to free his hands for the jacket.

"You're an hour early," I said. "They going barefoot?"

"Naw, they're busy," he said, and headed down the hall to the office. I followed, snubbed; after all, we had been friends for more than three years.

Pete came three days a week—Monday, Wednesday, and Friday—around noon, after

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he had finished his rounds in an office building on Eighth Avenue. Wolfe always gave him a dollar, since it was a five-minute walk for him to the old brownstone on West 35th Street, and I only gave him a quarter, but he gave my shoes as good a shine as he did Wolfe's. None better.

I never pretended to keep busy while he was working on Wolfe because I liked to listen. It was instructive. Wolfe's line was that a man who had been born in Greece, even though he had left at the age of six, should be familiar with the ancient glories of his native land, and he had been hammering away at Pete for forty months.

That morning, as Wolfe swiveled his oversized chair, in which he was seated behind his desk, and Pete knelt and got his box in place, and I crossed to my desk, Wolfe demanded, "Who was Eratosthenes and who accused him of murder in a great and famous speech in four-oh-three B.C.?"

Pete, poising his brush, shook his head.

"Who?" Wolfe demanded.

"Maybe Pericles."

"Nonsense. Pericles had been dead twenty-six years. Confound it, I read parts of that speech to you last year. His name begins with L."

"Lycurgus."

"No! The Athenian Lycurgus hadn't been born!"

Pete looked up. "Today you must excuse me." He tapped his head with the edge of the brush. "Empty today. Why I came early, something happened. I go in a man's room, Mr. Ashby, a good customer, two bits every day. Room empty, nobody there. Window wide open, cold wind coming in. Tenth floor. I go and look out window, big crowd down below and cops. I go out to hall and take elevator down, I push through crowd, and there is my good customer, Mr. Ashby, there on the sidewalk, all smashed up terrible.

"I push back out of crowd, I look up, I see heads sticking out of windows, I think it's no good going up to customers now, they will be looking out of windows, so I come here, that's why I come early, so today you must excuse me, Mr. Wolfe." He started the brush going.

Wolfe grunted. "I advise you to return to that building without delay. Does anyone know you were in his room?"

"Sure. Miss Cox."

"She saw you enter?"

"Sure."

"How long were you in his room?"

"Maybe one minute."

"Did Miss Cox see you leave?"

"No, I go out another door to the hall."

"Did you push him out the window?"

Pete stopped brushing to raise his head. "Now, Mr. Wolfe. In God's name."

"I advise you to return. If a crowd had already gathered when you looked out the window, and if Miss Cox can fix the exact time you entered the room, you are probably not vulnerable, but you may be in a pickle. You should not have left the premises. The police will soon be looking for you. Go back at once. Mr. Goodwin's shoes can wait till Wednesday—or come this afternoon."

Pete put the brush down and got out the polish. "Cops," he said. "They're all right, I like cops. But if I tell a cop I saw someone—" He started dabbing polish on. "No," he said. "No, sir."

Wolfe grunted. "So you saw someone."

"I didn't say I saw someone, I only said what if I told a cop I did? Did they have cops in Athens in four-oh-three B.C.?" He dabbed polish.

That took the conversation back to the ancient glories of Greece, but I didn't listen. While Pete finished with Wolfe and then shined me, ignoring Wolfe's advice, I practised on

him. The idea that a detective should stick strictly to facts is the bunk. One good opinion can sometimes get you further than a hundred assorted facts. So I practised on Pete Vassos for that ten minutes.

Had he killed a man half an hour ago? If the facts, now being gathered by cops, made it possible but left it open, how would I vote? I ended by not voting because I would have had to know about motive. For money, no, Pete wouldn't. For vengeance, that would depend on what for. For fear, sure, if the fear was hot enough. So I couldn't vote.

An hour later, when I walked crosstown on an errand to the bank, I stopped at the corner at Eighth Avenue for a look. The smashed-up Mr. Ashby had been removed, but the sidewalk in front of the building was roped off to keep the crowd of volunteer criminologists from interfering with the research of a couple of homicide scientists, and three cops were dealing with the traffic. Looking up, I saw a few heads sticking out of windows, but none on the tenth floor, which was third from the top.

The afternoon *Gazette* is delivered a little after five o'clock at the old brownstone on West 35th Street which is owned and lived in and worked in—when

he works—by Nero Wolfe, and when we have no important operation going it's a dead hour in the office. Wolfe is up in the plant rooms on the roof with Theodore for his four-to-six afternoon session with the orchids, Fritz is in the kitchen getting something ready for the oven or the pot, and I am killing time.

So when the *Gazette* came that day it was welcomed, and I learned all it knew about the death of Mr. Dennis Ashby. He had hit the sidewalk at 10:35 A.M. and had died on arrival. No one had been found who had seen him come out of the window of his office on the tenth floor, but it was assumed that that was where he had come from, since the receptionist, Miss Frances Cox, had spoken with him on the phone at 10:28, and no other nearby window had been open.

If the police had decided whether to call it accident or suicide or murder they weren't saying. If anyone had been with Ashby in the room when he left by the window, he wasn't bragging about it. No one had gone to the room after 10:35, when Ashby had hit the sidewalk, for some fifteen minutes, when a bootblack named Peter Vassos had entered, expecting to give Ashby a shine.

A few minutes later, when a

cop who had got Ashby's name from papers in his pocket had arrived on the tenth floor, Vassos had departed. Found subsequently at his home on Graham Street on the Lower East Side, Manhattan, he had been taken to the District Attorney's office for questioning.

Dennis Ashby, 39, married, no children, had been vice-president of Mercer's Bobbins, Inc., in charge of sales and promotion. According to his business associates and his widow, he had been in good health and his affairs had been in order, and he had had no reason to kill himself. The widow, Joan, was grief-stricken and wouldn't see reporters.

Ashby had been below average in stature, 5 feet 7, 140 pounds. That bit, saved for the last, was a typical *Gazette* touch, suggesting that it would be no great feat to shove a man that size through a window, so it had probably been murder, and buy the *Gazette* tomorrow to find out.

At six o'clock the sound came from the hall of the elevator groaning its way down and jolting to a stop, and Wolfe entered. I waited until he had crossed to his desk and got his seventh of a ton lowered into the oversized chair to say, "They've got Pete down at the D.A.'s office. Apparently he

didn't go back to the building at all, and they—"

The doorbell rang. I got up and stepped to the hall, switched on the stoop light, saw a familiar brawny figure through the one-way glass, and turned. "Cramer."

"What does he want?" Wolfe growled. That meant let him in. When Inspector Cramer of Homicide South is not to be admitted, with or without reason, Wolfe merely snaps, "No!" When he is to be admitted but is first to be riled, again with or without reason, Wolfe says, "I'm busy."

As for Cramer, he has moods too. When I open the door he may cross the sill and march down the hall without a grunt of greeting, or he may hello me man to man. Twice he has even called me Archie, but those were slips of the tongue. That day he let me take his hat and coat, and when I got to the office he was in the red leather chair near the end of Wolfe's desk, but not settled back.

That chair has a deep seat, and Cramer likes to plant his feet flat on the floor. I have never seen him cross his legs. He told Wolfe this wouldn't take long, he just wanted a little information to fill in, and Wolfe grunted.

"About that man that came this morning to shine your

shoes," Cramer said. "Peter Vassos. What time did he get here?"

Wolfe shook his head. "You should know better, Mr. Cramer. You do know better. I answer questions only when you have established their relevance to your duty and to my obligation, and then at my discretion."

"Yeah." Cramer squeezed his lips together and counted three. "Yeah. Never make it simple, no matter how simple it is, that's you. I'm investigating what may have been a murder, and Peter Vassos may have done it. If he did, he came straight to you afterwards. I know he's been coming more than three years, three times a week, to shine your shoes, but today he came early. I want to know what he said. I don't have to remind you that you're a licensed private detective, you're not a lawyer, and communications to you are not privileged. What time did Vassos come this morning and what did he say?"

Wolfe's brows were up. "Not established. 'May have' isn't enough. A man can get through a window unaided."

"This one didn't. Close to certain. There was a thing on his desk, a big hunk of polished petrified wood, and it had been wiped. A thing like that on a

man's desk would have somebody's prints or at least smudges, and it didn't. It had been wiped. And at the back of his head, at the base of his skull, something smooth and round had hit him hard. Nothing he hit when he landed could have done that, and nothing on the way down. This hasn't been released yet, but it will be in the morning."

Wolfe made a face. "Then your second 'may have.' Supposing that someone hit him with that thing and then pushed him out the window, it couldn't have been Mr. Vassos, by his account. A woman, a Miss Cox, saw him enter Mr. Ashby's room; and within seconds after entering, finding no one there, he looked out the window and saw a crowd gathered below. If Miss Cox can set the time within—"

"She can. She does. But Vassos might have been in there before that. He could have entered by the other door, direct from the outer hall. That door was kept locked, but he could have knocked and Ashby let him in. He hit Ashby with that thing, killed him or stunned him, dragged or carried him to the window and pushed him out, left by that door, went down the hall and entered the anteroom and spoke to Miss Cox, went to Mercer's room and

gave him a shine, went to Busch's room and gave *him* a shine, went to Ashby's room by the inner hall, speaking to Miss Cox again, looked out of the window or didn't, left by the door to the outer hall he had used before, took the elevator down and left the building, decided he had better come and see you, and came. What did he say?"

Wolfe took a deep breath. "Very well. I won't pretend that I'm not concerned. Aside from the many pleasant conversations I have had with Mr. Vassos, he is an excellent bootblack and he never fails to come. He would be hard to replace. Therefore I'll indulge you. Archie. Report to Mr. Cramer in full. Verbatim."

I did so. That was easy, compared to some of the lengthy and complicated dialogues I have had to report to Wolfe over the years. I got my notebook and pen and short-handed it down as I recited it, so there would be no discrepancy if he wanted it typed and signed later.

Since I was looking at the notebook I couldn't see Cramer's face, but of course his sharp gray eyes were fastened on me, trying to spot a sign of a skip or stumble. When I came to the end, Pete's departure, and tossed the notebook on my

desk, he looked at Wolfe.

"You advised him to go back there at once?"

"Yes. Mr. Goodwin's memory is incomparable."

"I know it is. He's good at forgetting too. Vassos didn't go back. He went home and we found him there. His account of his conversation with you agrees with Goodwin's, only he left something out or Goodwin put something in. Vassos says nothing about telling you he saw someone."

"He didn't. You heard it. It was an if—what if he told a cop he saw someone."

"Yeah. Like for instance, if he told a cop he saw someone going into Ashby's room by the hall door, would that be a good idea, or not? Like that?"

"Pfui. You're welcome to your conjectures, but don't expect me to rate them. I'm concerned; I have said so; it would be a serious inconvenience to lose Mr. Vassos. If he killed that man a jury would wonder why. So would I."

"We're not ready for a jury." Cramer stood up. "But we've got a pretty good guess at why. Granting that Goodwin has reported everything Vassos said today, which I don't, what about other days? What has Vassos ever said about Ashby?"

"Nothing."

"Never mentioned his name?"

"No. Archie?"

"Right," I said. "Not before today."

"What has he ever said about his daughter?"

"Nothing," Wolfe said.

"Correction," I said. "What Pete talked about wasn't up to him. Mr. Wolfe kept him on the ancient glories of Greece. But one day more than two years ago, in June nineteen fifty-eight, when Mr. Wolfe was upstairs in bed with the flu, Pete told me his daughter had just graduated from high school and showed me a picture of her. Pete and I would know each other a lot better if it wasn't for ancient Greece."

"And he has never mentioned his daughter since?"

"No, how could he?"

"Nuts. Greece." Cramer looked at Wolfe. "You know what I think? I think this. If you know Vassos killed Ashby, and you know why, on account of his daughter, and you can help nail him for it, you won't. If you can help him wriggle out of it, you will."

Cramer tapped Wolfe's desk with a finger. "Just because, by God, you can count on him to come and shine your shoes, and you like to spout to him about people nobody ever heard of. That's you." His eyes darted to me. "And you." He turned and tramped out.

It was exactly 28 hours later, Tuesday evening at half-past ten, that I went to answer the doorbell and saw, through the one-way glass of the front door, a scared but determined little face bounded at the sides by the turned-up collar of a brown wool coat and on top by a fuzzy brown thing that flopped to the right. When I opened the door she told me with a single rush of breath, "You're Archie Goodwin I'm Elma Vassos."

It had been a normal nothing-stirring day, three meals, Wolfe reading a book and dictating letters in between his morning and afternoon turns in the plant rooms, Fritz housekeeping and cooking, me choring. It was still in the air whether I would have to find another bootblack. According to the papers the police had tagged Ashby's death as murder, but no one had been charged.

Around one o'clock Sergeant Purley Stebbins had phoned to ask if we knew where Peter Vassos was, and when I said no and started to ask a question he hung up on me. A little after four Lon Cohen of the *Gazette* had phoned to offer a grand for a thousand-word piece on Peter Vassos, a dollar a word, and another grand if I would tell him where Vassos was. I declined with thanks and made a counter offer, my autograph in

his album if he would tell me who at Homicide or the D.A.'s bureau had given him the steer that we knew Vassos. When I told him I had no idea where Vassos was he pronounced a word you are not supposed to use on the telephone.

I usually stick to the rule that no one is to be ushered to the office when Wolfe is there without asking him, but I ignore it now and then in an emergency. That time the emergency was a face. I had been in the kitchen chinning with Fritz. Wolfe was buried in a book, we had no case and no client, and to him no woman is ever welcome in that house. Ten to one he would have refused to see her.

But I had seen her scared little face and he hadn't, and anyway he hadn't done a lick of work for more than two weeks, and it would be up to me, not him, to find another bootblack if it came to that. So I invited her in, took her coat and put it on a hanger, escorted her to the office, and said, "Miss Elma Vassos. Pete's daughter."

Wolfe closed his book on a finger and glared at me. She put a hand on the back of the red leather chair to steady herself. It looked as if she might crack, and I took her arm and eased her into the chair. Wolfe transferred the glare to her,

and there was her face. It was a little face, but not too little, and the point was that you didn't see any of the details, eyes or mouth or nose, just the face. I have supplied descriptions of many faces professionally, but with her I wouldn't know where to begin. I asked her if she wanted a drink, water or something stronger, and she said no.

She looked at Wolfe and said, "You're Nero Wolfe. Do you know my father is dead?" She needed more breath.

Wolfe shook his head. His lips parted and closed again. He turned to me. "Confound it, get something! Brandy. Whiskey."

"I couldn't swallow it," she said. "You didn't know?"

"No." He was gruff. "When? How? Can you talk?"

"I guess so." She wasn't any too sure. "I have to. Some boys found him at the bottom of a cliff. I went and looked at him—not there, at the morgue." She set her teeth on her lip, hard, but it didn't change the face. She made the teeth let go. "They think he killed himself, he jumped off, but he didn't. I know he didn't."

Wolfe pushed his chair back. "I offer my profound sympathy, Miss Vassos. I'll leave you with Mr. Goodwin. You will give him the details." He moved, the book in his hand.

That was him. He thought she was going to flop, and a woman off the rail is not only unwelcome, she is not to be borne. Not by him. But she caught his sleeve and stopped him. "You," she said. "I must tell you. To my father you are a great man, the greatest man in the world. I must tell *you*."

"She'll do," I said. "She'll make it."

There are few men who would not like to be told they are the greatest in the world, and Wolfe isn't one of them. He stared down at her for five seconds, returned to his chair, sat, inserted the marker in the book and put it down, scowled at her, and demanded, "When did you eat?"

"I haven't—I can't swallow."

"Pfui. When did you eat?"

"A little this morning. My father hadn't come home and—"

He swiveled to push a button, leaned back, closed his eyes, and opened them when he heard a step at the door. "Tea with honey, Fritz. Toast, pot cheese, and Bar-le-Duc. For Miss Vassos."

Fritz went.

"I really can't," she said.

"You will if you want me to listen. Where is the cliff?"

It took her a second to go back. "It's in the country somewhere. I guess they told me, but I don't—"

"When was he found?"

"Sometime this afternoon, late this afternoon."

"You saw him at the morgue. Where, in the country?"

"No, they brought him; it's not far from here. When I had—when I could—I came here from there."

"Who was with you?"

"Two men, detectives. They told me their names, but I don't remember."

"I mean *with* you. Brother, sister, mother?"

"I have no brother or sister. My mother died ten years ago."

"When did you last see your father alive?"

"Yesterday. When I got home from work he wasn't there, and it was nearly six o'clock when he came, and he said he had been at the District Attorney's office for three hours, they had been asking him questions about Mr. Ashby. You know about Mr. Ashby, he said he told you about him when he came here. Of course I already knew about him because I work there. I *did* work there."

"Where?"

"At the office. That company. Mercer's Bobbins."

"Indeed. In what capacity?"

"I'm a stenographer. Not anybody's secretary, just a stenographer. Mostly typing and sometimes letters for Mr. Busch. My father got me the

job through Mr. Mercer."

"How long ago?"

"Two years ago. After I graduated from high school."

"Then you knew Mr. Ashby."

"Yes. I knew him a little, yes."

"About last evening. Your father came home around six. Then?"

"I had dinner nearly ready, and we talked, and we ate, and then we talked some more. He said there was something he hadn't told the police and he hadn't told you, and he was going to go and tell you in the morning and ask you what he ought to do. He said you were such a great man that people paid you fifty thousand dollars just to tell them what to do, and he thought you would tell him for nothing, so it would be foolish not to go and ask you."

"He wouldn't tell me what it was. Then a friend of mine came—I was going to a movie with her—and we went. When I got home father wasn't there and there was a note on the table. It said he was going out and might be late. One of the detectives tried to take the note but I wouldn't let him. I have it here in my bag if you want to see it."

Wolfe shook his head. "Not necessary. Had your father mentioned before you left that he intended to go out?"

"No. And he always did. We always told each other ahead of time what we were going to do."

"Had he given you no hint—? Very well, Fritz."

Fritz crossed to the red leather chair, put the tray on the little table that is always there for people to write checks on, and proffered her a napkin. She didn't lift a hand to take it. Wolfe spoke.

"I'll listen to more, Miss Vassos, only after you eat."

He picked up his book, opened to his page, and swiveled to put his back to her. She took the napkin. Fritz went. I could have turned to my desk and pretended to do something, but I would have been reflected to her in the big mirror on the wall back of my desk, which gives me a view of the door to the hall, and she would have been reflected to me; so I got up and went to the kitchen.

Fritz was at the side table putting the cover on the toaster. As I got the milk from the refrigerator I told him, "She's the daughter of Pete Vassos. I'll have to scare up a bootblack. He's dead."

"Him?" Fritz turned. "*Dieu m'en garde.*" He shook his head. "Too young. Then she is not a client?"

"Not one to send a bill to." I

poured milk. "Anyhow, as you know, he wouldn't take a paying client if one came up the stoop on his knees. It's December, and his tax bracket is near the top. If she wants him to help and he won't, I'll take a leave of absence and handle it myself. You saw her face."

He snorted. "She should be warned. About you."

"Sure. I'll do that first."

I don't gulp milk. When the glass was half empty I tiptoed out to the office door. Wolfe's back was still turned and Elma was putting jam on a piece of toast. I finished the milk, taking my time, and took the glass to the kitchen, and when I returned Wolfe had about-faced and put the book down and she was saying something. I entered and crossed to my desk.

"... and he had never done that before," she was telling Wolfe. "I thought he might have gone back to the District Attorney's office, so I phoned there, but he hadn't. I phoned two of his friends but they hadn't seen him. I went to work as usual, he goes to that building every morning, and I told Mr. Busch and he tried to find out if he was in the building, but no one had seen him."

"Then a detective came and asked me a lot of questions, and later, after lunch, another one came and took me to the Dis-

trict Attorney's office, and I—"

"Miss Vassos." Wolfe was curt. "If you please. You have eaten, though not much, and your faculties are apparently in order. You said you must tell *me*, and I would not be uncivil to your father's daughter, but these details are not essential. Give me brief answers to some questions. You said that they think your father killed himself, he jumped off. Who are *they*?"

"The police. The detectives."

"How do you know they do?"

"The way they talked. What they said. What they asked me. They think he killed Mr. Ashby and he knew they were finding out about it, so he killed himself."

"Do they think they know why he killed Mr. Ashby?"

"Yes. Because he had found out that Mr. Ashby had seduced me."

I lifted a brow. You couldn't be much briefer than that. There wasn't the slightest sign on her face that she had said anything remarkable. Nor was there any sign on Wolfe's face that he had heard anything remarkable. He asked, "How do you know that?"

"What they said this afternoon at the District Attorney's office. They used that word, 'seduced.'"

"Did you know that your

father had found out that Mr. Ashby had seduced you?"

"Of course not, because he hadn't. My father wouldn't have believed that even if Mr. Ashby had told him, or even if I had gone crazy and told him, because he would have known it wasn't so. My father knew me."

Wolfe was frowning. "You mean he *thought* he knew you?"

"He *did* know me. He didn't know I couldn't be seduced—I suppose any girl *could* be seduced if her head gets turned enough—but he knew if I was I would tell him. And he knew if I ever was seduced it wouldn't be Mr. Ashby or anyone like him. My father knew me."

"Let's make it clear. Are you saying that Mr. Ashby had not seduced you?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Had he tried to?"

She hesitated. "No." She considered. "He took me to dinner and a show three times. The last time was nearly a year ago. He asked me several times since, but I didn't go because I had found out what he was like and I didn't like him."

Wolfe's frown had gone. "Then why do the police think he had seduced you?"

"I don't know, but someone must have told them lies about Mr. Ashby and me, from what they said."

"Who? Did they name anyone?"

"No."

"Do you know who? Or can you guess?"

"No."

Wolfe's eyes came to me. "Archie?"

That was to be expected. It was merely routine. He pretends to presume that he knows nothing, and I know everything, about women, and he was asking me to tell him whether Elma Vassos had or had not been seduced by Dennis Ashby, yes or no. What the hell, I wasn't under oath, and I did have an opinion. "They don't go by dreams," I said. "She's probably right, someone has fed them a line. Say thirty to one."

"You believe her."

"Believe? Make it twenty to one."

She turned her head, slowly, to look straight at me. "Thank you, Mr. Goodwin," she said and turned back to Wolfe.

His eyes narrowed at her. "Well. Assuming you have been candid, what then? You said you must tell *me*, and I have listened. Your father is dead. I esteemed him, and I would spare no pains to resurrect him if that were possible. But what can you expect me to tender beyond my sympathy, which you have?"

"Why . . ." She was surprised. "I thought—isn't it obvious, what they're going to do? I mean that they're not going to do anything? If they think my father killed Mr. Ashby on account of me and then killed himself, what *can* they do? That will end it, it's already ended for them. So I'll have to do something, and I don't know what, so I had to come to you because my father said—"

She stopped and covered her mouth with her spread fingers. It was the first quick strong movement she had made. "Oh!" she said through the fingers. Her hand dropped. "Of course. You must forgive me."

She opened her bag, a big brown leather one, stuck her hand in, and took something out. "I should have done this before. My father never spent any of the money you paid him. This is it, all dollar bills, the bills you gave him. He said he would do something special with it some day, but he never said what. But he said—" She stopped. She clamped her teeth on her lip.

"Don't do that," Wolfe snapped.

She nodded. "I know, I won't. I haven't counted it, but it must be nearly five hundred dollars; you paid him three times a week for over three years." She got up and put it on Wolfe's

desk and returned to the chair. "Of course it's nothing to you, it's nothing like fifty thousand, so I'm really asking for charity; but it's for my father, not for me, and after all it will mean that you got your shoes shined for nothing for more than three years."

Wolfe looked at me. I had let her in, I admit that, but from his look you might have thought I had killed Ashby and Pete and had seduced her into the bargain. I cocked my head at him. He looked at her. "Miss Vassos. You are asking me to establish your father's innocence and your chastity. Is that it?"

"My chastity doesn't matter. I mean that's not it."

"But your father's innocence is."

"Yes. Yes!"

Wolfe wiggled a finger at the stack of dollar bills, held by rubber bands. "Your money. Take it. It is, as you say, nothing for a job like this, and if I am quixotic enough to undertake it I don't want a tip. I make no commitment. If I said yes or no now it would be no; it's midnight, bedtime, and I'm tired. I'll tell you in the morning. You will sleep here. There's a spare bedroom, adequate and comfortable." He pushed his chair back and rose.

"But I have no things—"

"You have your skin." He frowned down at her. "Suppose this. Suppose the assumptions of the police are correct: that Mr. Ashby had in fact seduced you, that your father learned about it and killed him, and that, fearing exposure, he then killed himself; and suppose that under that burden of knowledge you go home to face the night alone. What would you do?"

"But it's not true! He didn't!"

"I told you to suppose. Suppose it were true. What would you do?"

"Why . . . I would kill myself. Of course."

Wolfe nodded. "I assume you would. And if you die tonight or tomorrow in circumstances which make it plausible that you committed suicide, others, including the police, will make that assumption. The murderer knows that, and since his attempt to have Ashby's death taken for suicide might have succeeded, and his attempt to have your father's death taken for suicide apparently *has* succeeded, he will probably try again.

"If he knows you he knows that you are not without spirit, as you have shown by coming here, and you will be a mortal threat to him as long as you live. You will sleep here. I shall not be available before eleven in the morning, but Mr. Good-

win will, and you will tell him everything you know that may be useful.

"If I decide to help you, as a service to your father, I'll need all the information I can get. Don't try withholding anything from Mr. Goodwin; his understanding of attractive young women is extremely acute. Good night." He turned to me. "You'll see that the South Room is in order. Good night." He went.

As the sound came of the elevator door closing, the client told me, "Take the money, Mr. Goodwin. I don't want—" She started to shake, her head dropped, and her hands came up to cover her face. It was a good thing she had fought it off until the great man had left.

At 10:45 Wednesday morning I was at my desk, typing. When I had knocked on the door of the South Room, which is on the third floor, directly above Wolfe's room, at 7:45, Elma had been up and dressed. She said she had slept pretty well, but she didn't look it. I eat breakfast in the kitchen, but Fritz wouldn't want her to, so he served us in the dining room, and she did all right—all her orange juice, two griddle cakes, two slices of bacon, two shirred eggs with chives, and two cups of coffee. Then to the office, and

for nearly an hour, from 8:40 to 9:30, I had asked questions and she had answered them.

Since she had started to work for Mercer's Bobbins, Inc., two years back, their office space had doubled and their office staff had tripled. That is, their sales and executive office in the Eighth Avenue building; she didn't know what the increase had been in the factory in New Jersey, but it had been big. It was understood by everybody that the increase had been due to the ability and effort of one man, Dennis Ashby, who had been put in charge of sales and promotion three years ago. He had boosted more than bobbins; the firm now made more than twenty items used in the garment industry.

Of the dozen members of the staff she named and described, here are some samples:

JOHN MERCER, president. There had been an office party, with cake and punch, on his sixty-first birthday in September. He had inherited the business from his father; it was generally understood that he owned most of the stock of the corporation. He spent most of his time at the factory and was at the New York office only two days a week.

The firm had been about to go under when he had made Ashby vice-president and put

him in charge of sales and promotion. He called the employees by their first names, and they all liked him. They called him, not to his face, the Big M. He had children and grandchildren, Elma didn't know how many. None of them was active in the business.

ANDREW BUSCH, secretary of the corporation and office manager, was in his early thirties, not married. Up to a year ago he had been merely the head bookkeeper, and when the office manager had died of old age Mercer had promoted him. He had a room of his own, but three or four times a day he would appear in the rumpus and make the rounds of the desks. (The rumpus was the big room where 28 girls did the work. One of them had called it the rumpus room and it had been shortened to rumpus.) He had instructed the stenographers that when Ashby sent for one of them she was to stop at his room and tell him where she was going, so they called him, not to his face, Paladin.

PHILIP HORAN, salesman, in his middle thirties, married, two or three children. I include him because (a) he was seldom at the office before four in the afternoon but had been seen there Monday morning by one of the girls, (b) he had expected to get the job Mercer had given

Ashby and was known to be sore about it, and (c) he had asked one of the girls, an old-timer who had been with the firm as long as he had, to find out what had happened and was happening between Ashby and Elma Vassos, and had kept after her about it.

FRANCES COX, receptionist. Elma said she was 30, so she was probably 27 or 28. I do know a few things about women. I include her because if she had seen Pete entering Ashby's room she might have seen someone else on the move, and that might be useful.

DENNIS ASHBY, dead. He had told Elma a year back that he was 38. Had started with Mercer's Bobbins long ago, Elma didn't know how long, as a stock clerk. Small and not handsome. When I asked Elma to name the animal he was most like, she said a monkey. He had spent about half of his time out of the office, out promoting.

He had had no secretary; when he had wanted a stenographer he had called one in from the rumpus, and he had handled his appointments himself, with the assistance of Frances Cox, the receptionist. He had kept a battery of files in his own room. The girls had called him the Menace, naturally, with his name Dennis, but

also because they meant it. Elma had no knowledge of any seduction he had actually achieved, but there had been much talk.

JOAN ASHBY, the widow. I include her because the widow of a murdered man must always be included. She had once worked at Mercer's Bobbins, but had quit when she married Ashby, before Elma had got her job there. Elma had never seen her and knew next to nothing about her. Ashby had told Elma across a restaurant table that his marriage had been a mistake and he was trying to get his wife to agree to a divorce.

ELMA VASSOS. One point: when I asked her why she had gone to dinners and shows with a married man she said, "I told my father he had asked me, and he told me to go. He said every girl is so curious about married men she wants to be with one somewhere, and she does, and I might as well go ahead and have it over with. Of course, my father knew me."

As for Monday morning, Elma had been in Busch's room from 9:40 to 10:15, taking dictation from him, and then in the rumpus with the crew. About half-past eleven John Mercer had entered with a man, a stranger, and called them together, and the man had asked if any of them had

been in Ashby's room that morning, or had seen anyone entering or leaving it, and had got a unanimous no; and then Mercer had told them what had happened.

Even with my extremely acute understanding of attractive young women, I didn't suspect that she was holding out on me, except maybe on one detail, near the end, when I asked who she thought had lied to the cops about her and Ashby. She wouldn't name anyone even as a wild guess. I told her that was ridiculous, that any man or woman alive, knowing that someone or ones of a group had smeared him, would darned well have a notion who it was, but nothing doing. If any of them had it in for her she didn't know it, except Ashby, and he was dead.

At 10:45 I was at my desk typing that part, nearly finished, when the house phone buzzed and I turned and got it. Wolfe rarely interrupts himself in the plant rooms to buzz me. Since he eats breakfast in his room and goes straight up to the roof, I hadn't seen him, so I said good morning.

"Good morning. What are you doing?"

"Typing my conference with Miss Vassos. The substance. Not verbatim. About done."

"Well?"

"Nothing startling. Some facts that might help. As for believing her, it's now fifty to one."

He grunted. "Or better. What could conceivably have led her to come to me with her story if it weren't true? Confound it. Where is she?"

"In her room. Of course she isn't going to work."

"Has she eaten? A guest, welcome or not, must not starve."

"She won't. She ate. She phoned the D.A.'s office to ask when she can have the body."

"The account in *The Times* supports her conclusion that the police assume that her father killed Ashby and committed suicide—not, of course, explicitly. You have read it?"

"Yes. So has she."

"But *The Times* may be wrong, and certainly she may be. It's possible that Mr. Cramer is finessing, and if so we can leave it to him. You'll have to find out. Conclusively."

"Lon Cohen may know."

"That won't do. You'll have to see Mr. Cramer. Now."

"If he's finessing he won't show *me* his hand."

"Certainly not. It will take dexterity. Your intelligence, guided by experience."

"Yeah. That's me. I'll go as soon as I finish typing this—five minutes. You'll find it in

your drawer." I hung up, beating him to it.

It took only three minutes. I put the original in his desk drawer and the carbon in mine, went to the kitchen to tell Fritz I was leaving, got my coat from the hall rack, and departed. It's a good distance for a leg-stretcher from the old brownstone to Homicide South, but my brain likes to take it easy while I'm walking and I had to consult it about approaches, so I went to Ninth Avenue and flagged a taxi.

The dick at the desk, who was not my favorite city employee, said Cramer was busy but Lieutenant Rowcliff might spare me a minute, and I said no thank you and sat down to wait. It was close to noon when I was escorted down the hall to Cramer's room and found him standing at the end of his desk. As I entered he rasped, "So your client bought a one-way ticket. Want to see him?"

It seldom pays to prepare an approach. It depends on the approach. The frame of mind he was in, it was hopeless to try smoothing him, so I switched. "Nuts," I said offensively. "If you mean Vassos, he wasn't a client, he was just a bootblack. You owe Mr. Wolfe something and he wants it. Elma Vassos, the daughter, slept in his house last night."

"The hell she did. In your room?"

"No. I snore. She came and fed him a line that her life was in danger. Whoever killed Ashby and her father, she didn't know who, was going to kill her. Then the morning paper has it different. Not spelled out, but it's there, that Vassos killed Ashby and when you started breathing down his neck he found a cliff and jumped off.

"So you knew about it when you came to see Mr. Wolfe Monday, you knew then about Ashby and Elma Vassos. Why didn't you say so? If you had, when she came last night she wouldn't have got in. So you owe him something. When he turns her out he wants to make a little speech to her, and he wants to know who gave you the dope on her and Ashby. Off the record, and you won't be quoted."

He threw his head back and laughed. Not an all-out laugh, just a ha-ha. He stretched an arm to touch my chest with a forefinger. "Slept in his house, huh? Wonderful! I'd like to hear his speech, what will he call her? Not trollop or floozy, he'll have some fancy word for it. And he has the nerve—on out, Goodwin."

"He wants to know—"

"Nuts. Beat it."

"But dammit—"

"Out."

I went; and since there was now nothing to work the brain on, I walked back to 35th Street. Wolfe was at his desk with the book he was on, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, by Shirer. A tray on his desk held a beer bottle and a glass, and beside it was the report I had typed of my talk with Elma. I went to my desk and sat, and waited until he finished a paragraph and looked up.

"We'll have to bounce her," I said. "You will. I would prefer to marry her and reform her, but Cramer would take my license away. Do you want it in full?"

He said yes, and I gave it to him. At the end I said, "As you see, it didn't take any dexterity. The first thing he said, 'So your client bought a one-way ticket,' was enough. He is not finessing. You can't blame him for laughing, since he honestly believes that you have a floozy for a house guest. As for his refusing to name—"

"Shut up."

I leaned back and crossed my legs. He glowered at me for five seconds, then closed his eyes. In a moment he opened them. "It's hopeless," he said through his teeth.

"Yes, sir," I agreed. "I sup-

pose I could disguise myself as a bootblack and take Pete's box and try to—"

"Shut up! I mean it's intolerable. Mr. Cramer cannot be permitted to flout..." He put the book down without marking his place, which he never did. "There's no way out. I could have shined my shoes myself. I considered this possibility after reading your report, and here it is. Get Mr. Parker."

I didn't have to look at the book for the number of Nathaniel Parker, the lawyer. I turned to the phone and dialed it, and got him, and Wolfe lifted his receiver.

"Good morning, sir. Afternoon. I need you. I am going to advise a young woman who has consulted me to bring actions against a corporation and five or six individuals, asking for damages, say a million dollars from each of them, on account of defamatory statements they have made. Slander, not libel, since as far as I know the statements have been made orally and not published. She is here in my house. Can you come to my office? ... No, after lunch do. Three o'clock? ... Very well, I'll expect you."

He hung up and turned to me. "We'll have to keep her. You will go with her to her home to get whatever she needs—not now, later. Mr.

Cramer expects me to turn her out, does he? Pfui. She would be dead within twenty-four hours. Tell Fritz to take her lunch to her room. I will not be rude to a guest at my table, and the effort to control myself would spoil the meal."

I asked Parker once how many law books he had in his office, and he said about 700. I asked how many there were in print in the English language, and he said probably around 10,000. So I suppose you can't expect to give a lawyer an order for a lawsuit the way you give a tailor an order for a suit of clothes. But they sure do make a job of it.

Parker came on the dot at three, and they barely got it settled in time for Wolfe to keep his afternoon date with the orchids. At three minutes to four Wolfe got to his feet and said, "Then tomorrow as early as may be. You'll proceed as soon as Archie phones you that he has explained the matter to Miss Vassos."

Parker shook his head. "The way you operate. You actually haven't mentioned it to her?"

"No. It would have been pointless to mention it until I learned if it was feasible."

Wolfe went to the hall to take the elevator to the roof, Parker went along, and I went

to hold his coat and let him out. Then I mounted two flights to the South Room and knocked on the door, heard a faint "Come in," and did so. Elma was sitting on the edge of the bed running her fingers through her hair. "I guess I fell asleep," she said. "What time is it?"

I would have been willing to help her with the hair. Any man would; it was nice hair. "Four o'clock," I said. "Fritz says you ate only two of his Creole fritters. You don't care for shrimps?"

"I'm sorry. He doesn't like me, and I don't blame him, I'm a nuisance." She sighed, deep.

"That's not it. He suspects any woman who enters the house of wanting to take it over." I pulled a chair around and sat. "There have been developments. I went to see a cop, an Inspector named Cramer, and you're right. They think your father killed Ashby and then himself. You are now Mr. Wolfe's client. That stack of bills in the safe is still your property, but I have taken a dollar from it as a retainer. Do you approve?"

"Of course—but take all of it. I know it's nothing—"

"Skip it. That's no inducement for him. And don't thank him. He would rather miss a meal than have anyone think

he's a softy, that he would wiggle a finger to help anyone. Don't even hint at it. The idea is that Cramer has flouted him, his word, and therefore he will make a monkey of Cramer, and I admit that that may be the main point. So he has to prove that your father didn't kill Ashby, and the only way he can do that is to find out who did.

"The question is how. He would have to send me to that building to go over the setup and see people, and to invite some of them to come to his office, since he never leaves the house on business, but he can't expect the impossible even of me. They would toss me out, and they wouldn't come. So he must—"

"Some of the girls might come. And Mr. Busch might."

"Not enough. We need the ones who wouldn't. So he must drop a bomb. You are going to sue six people for damages, a million dollars each. Slander. He was going to have you sue the corporation too, but the lawyer vetoed it. The lawyer is preparing the papers and will go ahead as soon as you phone him to. His name is Nathaniel Parker and he's good.

"It isn't expected that any of the cases will ever get to a court or that you will collect anything, that's not the idea. The idea is that the fur will

begin to fly. Do you want to consult anybody before you tell Parker to go ahead? Do you know a lawyer?"

"No." Her fingers were clasped tight. "Of course I'll do anything Mr. Wolfe says. Who are the six people?"

"One, John Mercer. Two, Andrew Busch. Three, Philip Horan. Four, Frances Cox. Five, Mrs. Ashby. Six, Inspector Cramer. Anything Cramer says in his official capacity is privileged, but there's a point of law. He may have said something to a reporter, and he told me you're a floozy, or implied it. At least it will be a threat to get him on the witness stand under oath and ask him who told him what about you and Ashby, and just having him summoned will be a pleasure for Mr. Wolfe and you might as well humor him. You're not listening."

"Yes, I am. I don't think I— Can't you leave Mr. Busch out?"

"Why should we?"

"Because I don't think he said anything like that about me. I'm sure he wouldn't."

"Neither did some of the others, probably. It's even conceivable that none of those five did. This is only to get in there, to get at them."

She nodded. "I know, I understand that, but I wouldn't

want Mr. Busch to think that I think he might slander me. If what you want—if Mr. Wolfe wants to talk to him, I'm pretty sure he would come if I asked him."

I eyed her. "There seems to be an angle you didn't mention this morning. When you told me about Busch you didn't say he would come if you whistled."

"I'm not saying it now!" She was indignant. "All I'm saying, he's a nice man, and he's decent, and he wouldn't do that!"

"Have you seen much of him out of the office?"

"No. After Mr. Ashby, I decided I wouldn't make any dates with any man in the office, married or not."

"Okay, we'll exclude Busch, with the understanding that you'll produce him if and when we need him." I got up. "We'll go down to the office and phone Parker, and then we'll go and get whatever you want for an indefinite stay. It may be two days and it may be two months. When Mr. Wolfe—"

"Stay here for two months? I can't!"

"You can and will if necessary. If you got killed it would be next to impossible for Mr. Wolfe to get back at Cramer, and that would sour him for good and he would be unbearable. If you want to do things to your face and hair, not that I

see anything wrong with them, I'll be down in the office." I went.

Waiting to call Parker until she came down, since he would want to hear his client's voice as evidence that she existed, I had a notion to buzz the plant rooms and ask Wolfe if he wanted to see Andrew Busch at six o'clock, but since he would probably have insisted on Busch getting a summons along with the others I decided against it. I'm a softy.

Elma came down much sooner than most girls would have after a nap, and I dialed and got Parker, told him it was all set but that Busch was to be crossed off, and put Elma on. He asked her if he was to proceed on her behalf as he had been instructed by Wolfe, and she said yes, and that was it. I told her I had another call to make, dailed the number of the *Gazette*, got Lon Cohen, and asked him if his offer of a grand for a piece on Pete Vassos was still open. He said he'd have to see the piece first.

"We haven't got time to write it," I said. "We're busy. But if you want something for nothing, Miss Elma Vassos, his daughter, has engaged the services of Nero Wolfe, the famous private detective, and is staying at his house, and is not accessible. On his advice, she has en-

gaged Nathaniel Parker, the famous counselor, to bring an action against five people: John Mercer, Philip Horan, Frances Cox, Mrs. Dennis Ashby, and Inspector Cramer of the N.Y.P.D.

"She is asking for a million dollars for damages for slander from each of them. They will be served tomorrow, probably in time for your first edition. I'm giving you this, exclusive, on instructions from Mr. Wolfe. Parker has been told that you'll probably be phoning him for confirmation, and you'll get it. Yours truly. See you in court."

"Wait a minute, hold it! You can't just—"

"Sorry, I'm busy. No use calling back because I won't be here. Print now, pay later."

I hung up and went to the kitchen to tell Fritz we were leaving, and by the time I got to the hall rack Elma had her hat and coat on. Since her place was downtown we went to Eighth Avenue for a taxi. She was all right at walking. Walking with a girl, you can tell pretty well if you'd want to dance with her. Not if she keeps step, she may not have the legs for that, but if she naturally stays with you without doing a barnacle.

Another mark for her, she didn't apologize for the neighborhood she lived in as the cab

turned into Graham Street and stopped in front of Number 314. At that, it wasn't as bad in the December dark as it would have been in daylight; no street is. Dirt doesn't look so dirty. But I must say the vestibule she led me into would have appreciated some attention, and when she used her key and we entered, the inside was no better.

"Up three flights," she said, went to the stairs, and I followed. I admit I thought she was overdoing it a little. She might at least have said something like, "When I got a job I thought we ought to move, but my father didn't want to," just casually. Not a word.

On the third landing she started down the hall toward the rear, stopped after a couple of steps, and said, "Why, the light's on!"

I was at her elbow. I whispered, "Which door?" She pointed to the right, to where a strip of light showed through the crack at the bottom of a door. I whispered, "Is there a bell?" and she whispered back, "It isn't working."

I went to the door and knocked on it, and after a short wait it opened, and facing me was a man about my height with a broad flat face and a lot of tousled brown hair.

"Good evening," I said.

"Where's Miss Vassos?" he said. "Are you a police— Oh! Thank God!"

Elma was there. "But you—how did you—this is Mr. Busch, Mr. Goodwin."

"I seem to be..." He let it hang, apparently undecided how he seemed to be. He looked at me and back at her.

"I'll trade you even," I said. "I'll tell you why I'm here if you'll tell me why you're here. I came to carry a bag of clothes and accessories for Miss Vassos. She is staying at Nero Wolfe's house on Thirty-fifth Street. My name is Archie Goodwin and I work for him. Your turn."

"Nero Wolfe the detective?"

"Right."

He went to her. "You're staying at his house?"

"Yes."

"You were there last night and today?"

"Yes."

"I wish you had let me know. I came here from the office, I just got here. I was here last night. I got the janitor to let me in; he's worried too. I was afraid you might—I'm glad to see—I thought perhaps..."

"I guess I should have phoned," she said.

"Yes, I wish you had; then at least I would have known..."

He didn't sound much like Paladin. Or even an office manager. "If you don't mind," I

said, "Miss Vassos would like to come in and pack a bag. She has hired Nero Wolfe to find out who killed Dennis Ashby, and she'll stay at his house until he does. Of course, since you think her father killed Ashby, I don't suppose—"

"I don't think her father killed Ashby."

"No? Then why did you tell the police that he had found out that Ashby had seduced her?"

He hauled off and swung at me. He meant well, but was so slow that I could have landed a poke while he was still on his backswing. Elma was quicker, jumping between us. He was going through with it anyhow, looping around her, and he would finally have reached the target if I had moved my head eight inches to the left and waited till he got there; but instead I caught his wrist and jerked it down and gave it a twist. That twist hurts, but he didn't squeak.

Elma, between us, turned to face me, protesting, "I told you he wouldn't!"

"I didn't," he said.

"Do you know who did?"

"No."

"Okay, you can come along for a talk with Nero Wolfe. You can carry her bag. If there are two, we'll each take one. Go ahead, Miss Vassos, I won't let him hurt me."

She slipped in past him. Busch looked at his wrist and felt at it, and I told him it might swell a little. He turned and went inside, and I followed. It was a medium-sized room, very neat, good enough chairs and nice plain rugs, a TV set in a corner, magazines on a table, shelves with books.

A framed picture on top of the book shelves looked familiar and I crossed over, and darned if it wasn't Wolfe on the cover of *Tick* magazine. That had been more than a year ago. I allowed myself a healthy grin as I thought of how Sergeant Stebbins, or anyone else from Homicide, had felt when he came to have a look at the home of a murderer and found a picture of Nero Wolfe in a place of honor. I would have liked to take it and show it to Wolfe. I had heard him quote what someone said, that no man is a hero to his valet, but apparently he could be to his bootblack.

When Elma came out of an inner room with a suitcase and a small bag, Busch, who had put his overcoat on, went to relieve her of the load. I looked at my watch: 5:55. Wolfe would be down from the plant rooms by the time we got there.

"I'll take one," I offered. "Better give the wrist a rest."

"The wrist's all right," he

said, trying not to set his jaw.

A hero.

There can be such a thing as too much self-control. I should have resigned that day, for the forty-third time, when Wolfe glared at me and said, "I won't see him." It was inexcusable, being childish in front of a client. Leaving Busch in the front room, I had gone with Elma to the office, explained why I had told Parker to leave Busch out, reported the episode at Graham Street, said that I had checked with the janitor on the way out and he had admitted that he had let Busch into the Vassos apartment, and asked if he wanted Elma present while he talked with Busch; and he said, "I won't see him." Top that.

He knew he was going to have to see a bunch of them and he was paying a lawyer to pull a stunt that would make them come, but that would be tomorrow and this was today and he was reading a book, and I hadn't phoned to warn him. I should have walked out on him, but there was Elma, so I merely said, "He can have my room and I'll sleep here on the couch."

His eyes narrowed at me. He knew I meant it and that I wouldn't back down, and that it was his fault for starting it in

front of a witness. If I had just sat and met his gaze it would have had to end either by his firing me or my quitting; so I arose, said I would take Miss Vassos' luggage up to her room, shook my head no at her on my way to the hall, picked up the bag and suitcase, mounted the two flights, put them in the South Room, returned to the landing, and stood and listened.

That simplified it for him. With me there it would have been impossible; with me gone, all he had to do was to get her to say that it might help if he talked to Busch. Which he did. I could hear the voices, though not the words, for three minutes; then nothing; and then voices again, including Busch's. I descended.

Of course I kept my eyes straight ahead as I entered and crossed to my desk, detouring around Busch, who was in one of the yellow chairs that had been drawn up to face Wolfe's desk. Wolfe was talking.

"... and I intend to do so. I'm not obliged to account for the springs of my interest. Call it pique. Mr. Vassos kept my shoes presentable and never failed me; it won't be easy to replace him; and whoever deprived me of his services will be made to regret it. Let's consider you, since you're here. Discovered by Mr. Goodwin and Miss

Vassos in her apartment, you affected concern for her welfare. Real concern, or assumed?"

Busch was sitting straight and stiff, his palms on his knees. "I don't have to account to you, either," he declared, louder than necessary. "How do I know what you're going to do?"

"You don't. But you will. I won't debate it. Go. You'll be back."

I gritted my teeth. He was taking the trick after all. He was putting him out, with a dodge that tied my tongue. If there had been a cliff handy I would have pushed him off. But it didn't work. Busch looked at Elma, who was in the red leather chair. That turned his head so I couldn't see his face, but there must have been a question on it, for she answered it.

"He's going to do what he says, Mr. Busch. He's going to make a monkey of an Inspector named Cramer. If he wants you to tell him anything—and if you want to—"

"I want— Will you marry me?"

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"Will you marry me?"

She stared, speechless.

"Effective, Mr. Busch," Wolfe growled. His dodge wasn't going to work. "For establishing briefly and cogently that

your concern is real, admirable. Then you don't believe that Miss Vassos was seduced by Mr. Ashby?"

"No. I know she wasn't."

"You told Mr. Goodwin that you don't know who told the police that she had been."

"I don't."

"But you knew that someone had."

"I didn't exactly know. I knew that the police thought that, or suspected it, from questions they asked me."

"Was that why you were so concerned for Miss Vassos' welfare that you went to her home last night and persuaded the janitor to let you in and repeated the performance today?"

"It was partly that, but I would have done that anyway. Yesterday she was worried about her father because he hadn't come home, and I tried to find out if he was in the building. Then last night the news came that he was dead, his body had been found. I phoned her home and there was no answer, and I went there, and there was no word from her today, and the police didn't know where she was, so I went again."

"I know what you're getting at, you want to know if I was there waiting for her because I was worried about her or because I wanted to kill her. Be-

cause someone must want to kill her, someone must have lied about her to her father and then lied to the police."

Wolfe nodded. "You're assuming that her father believed the lie and killed Ashby and then killed himself."

"No, I'm not. I only know he might have. From the way I'm talking to you, you probably think I'm a pretty good talker, that I don't have any trouble speaking my piece, but I've been wanting for more than a year to tell her how I feel, that I know how wonderful she is, that there's no girl on earth like her, that I have never—"

"Yes. You established that point by asking her to marry you. She has probably grasped it. As you will no doubt hear from her when you get a chance, she is certain that her father would not have believed such a lie about her, so he did not kill Ashby, so he did not kill himself. Therefore I need to know as much as possible about people's movements at the critical times.

"According to the Medical Examiner as reported in the paper, Peter Vassos landed at the bottom of that cliff and died between ten o'clock and midnight Monday evening. Since Miss Vassos certainly won't marry you if you killed her father, let's eliminate you.

Where were you those two hours?"

"I was at home. I went to bed about eleven o'clock."

"You live alone?"

"Yes."

"Good. You have no alibi. A man with an alibi is suspect *ipso facto*. Now for Mr. Ashby. Where were you at ten thirty-five Monday morning?"

"In my room. My office."

"Alone?"

"Yes. I've gone over this with the police. Miss Vassos had been there taking letters, but she left about a quarter-past ten. Pete came about a quarter to eleven and gave me a shine. In between those two times I was alone."

"You didn't leave your room?"

"No."

"Was the door open and did you see anyone pass?"

"The door was open, but my room is at the end of the hall. I never see anyone pass."

"Then you can't help much. But you do corroborate Mr. Vassos' account of his movements. If he came to your room at ten forty-five, shined your shoes, and went straight to Mr. Ashby's room, he entered it about ten fifty-two. He arrived here at three minutes' past eleven. Do you know where he had been just before coming to you?"

"Yes, he had been in Mr. Mercer's room, giving him a shine."

"And before that?"

"I don't know. That's what the police wanted to know. They think he had already been in Ashby's room, that he went in by the other door and killed him."

"Did they tell you that?"

"No, but it was obvious from their questions—about him and about that other door."

"Does your room also have a door into the outer hall?"

"No. Ashby's is the only one."

Wolfe turned his head to look up at the wall clock. Half an hour till dinnertime. He looked at Busch. "Now, sir. As I told you at the beginning, I have concluded that Mr. Vassos did not kill Mr. Ashby, and I intend to find out who did and expose him. On this perhaps you *can* help. Who is safe or satisfied or solvent because Ashby is dead? *Cui bono?*"

"I don't get—Oh." Busch nodded. "Of course. That's Latin. The police asked me too, but not like that. I told them I didn't know, and I don't. I saw very little of Ashby personally, I mean outside of business. I knew his wife when she worked there, her name was Snyder then, Joan Snyder, but I've only seen her a couple of times since she married Ashby two years

ago. The way you put it, safe or satisfied or solvent because he's dead—I don't know."

"What about people in the office?"

"Nobody liked him. I didn't. I don't think even Mr. Mercer did. We all knew he had saved the business, he was responsible for its success, but we didn't like him. I had complaints from the girls about him. They didn't like to go to his room. A few months ago one girl quit on account of him. When I took it up with Mr. Mercer he said Ashby had the defects of his qualities, that when he wanted something he never hesitated to go after it, and that was why the corporation's income was ten times what it had been four years ago. But when I say nobody liked him maybe I ought to say except one." His eyes went to Elma and back to Wolfe.

"Miss Vassos?"

"Good Lord, no." He was shocked. "Because I looked at her? I just happened—I just wanted to. Miss Cox, Frances Cox, the receptionist. Ashby wouldn't have a secretary, and Miss Cox did the things for him that a secretary does, appointments and so on, except stenography. Maybe she liked him; I suppose she must have. There was a lot of office gossip about them, but you can't go by office

gossip. If an office manager took all the gossip seriously he'd go crazy. Only one day last spring Ashby's wife—I told you she was Joan Snyder when she worked there—she came and asked me to fire her."

"To fire Miss Cox?"

"Yes. She said she was a bad influence on her husband. I had to laugh, I couldn't help it—a bad influence on Dennis Ashby. I told her I couldn't fire her, and I couldn't. Ashby had had her salary raised twice without consulting me."

Wolfe grunted. "Another name Miss Vassos has mentioned. Philip Horan. Since he's a salesman, I presume he worked under Ashby?"

"Yes."

"He had expected to get the promotion that Ashby had got?"

"Yes."

"And he resented it?"

"Yes."

"Then Ashby's death is no bereavement for him?"

"No."

"You are suddenly laconic. Have I touched a nerve?"

"Well . . . I thought Phil Horan deserved to get that job, and I still think so."

"And he'll get it now?"

"I suppose he will."

"I won't ask if he might have killed Ashby to get it; you're partial and would of course say no." Wolfe looked up at the

clock. "Have you ever sat at table with Miss Vassos, had a meal with her?"

"I don't see what bearing that has on—"

"None, but it's a civil question. Have you?"

"No. I asked her twice, but she declined."

"Then it was foolhardy to ask her to marry you. You can't know what a woman is like until you see her at her food. I invite you to dine with us. There will be chicken sorrel soup with egg yolks and sherry, and roast quail with a sauce of white wine, veal stock, and white grapes. You will not be robbing us; there is enough."

I didn't catch his response because I was commenting to myself. The rule of no business at meals was strictly enforced, but I would have to work right through the soup and quail on to the cheese and coffee, as an expert, taking Busch in. When he left I would be asked if his concern for Miss Vassos was real or phony, yes or no. If I couldn't say, some good grub would have been wasted.

It was wasted.

The fur started to fly, the first flurry, a little after two Thursday afternoon, when Parker phoned while we were eating lunch—Elma with us—to say that he had just had a

talk with an attorney representing John Mercer, Philip Horan, and Frances Cox. He had called before noon to say that all five of them had been served. He had told the attorney that his client, Elma Vassos, had retained him and told him to bring the actions after she had been advised to do so by Nero Wolfe, who was investigating the situation for her; that he was satisfied his client had a valid complaint but he wouldn't discuss it with the opposing counselor until the investigation had progressed further; that after careful consideration he felt that it would probably be impossible to arrive at a settlement without a court trial; and that he would of course report the conversation to his client, who was staying at Nero Wolfe's house.

I returned to the dining room and relayed it to Wolfe, who would not interrupt a meal to speak on the phone.

The next flurry came two hours later, from the widow. Wolfe had gone up to the plant rooms, and Elma had gone with him to look at the orchids. Not that he had thawed any; he had got the notion that she was working on me and the less we were alone together the better. The phone rang and I answered it. "Nero Wolfe's office, Archie Goodwin speaking."

"I want to talk to Elma Vassos." A woman's voice, peevish.

"Your name, please?"

"Oh, indeed. Is she there?"

"Not in the room, but I can get her. If you don't mind giving me your name?"

"I don't mind a bit. Joan Ashby. Don't bother to get her; you'll do, if you're Archie Goodwin. I've just been talking to that lawyer, Parker, and he told me she's at Nero Wolfe's house. I told him if she wants to sue me for a million dollars she can go right ahead, and I thought I might as well tell her too. He said he would prefer to speak with my attorney, and I said that would be fine if I had one. What would I pay an attorney with? Tell Elma Vassos if she gets some of those millions from those others I would deeply appreciate it if she would pay some of my husband's debts, and then maybe I could eat. I'd like to see her at that, I'd like to see the one that got him killed."

"Why don't you, Mrs. Ashby? Come, by all means. It's not far, if you're at home. The address is—"

"I know the address, but I'm not coming. When I went out this morning, from the bunch of reporters and photographers on the sidewalk waiting for me you might think I was Liz Taylor. I'd like to see her, but

not enough to face that gang again. Just tell her all she gets out of me wouldn't buy her a subway token. If she wants—"

"She'd like to see you too."

"I'll bet she would."

"She really would. She said so last night. Why don't I take her there? We can be there in twenty minutes. You've lost a husband, and she has lost a father. It would do you both good."

"Sure. We can swap tears. Come ahead, but bring your own hankies. I use paper towels."

She hung up. I buzzed the plant rooms on the house phone, got Wolfe, and reported. He growled, "She's probably lying about the debts, and bluffing. I'll send Miss Vassos down at once. Don't bring that wretch back with you."

"But you wanted to see all of them."

"Not that one. Not unless it becomes imperative. Pfui. You will judge. Your intelligence guided by experience."

When Elma came—down the stairs, not in the elevator—I was waiting for her in the hall with my coat on. When I told her it might be a little hard to take, judging from Mrs. Ashby on the phone, she said she could stand it if I could, and when, after we got a taxi on Ninth Avenue and were crawl-

ing crosstown, I gave her the conversation verbatim, she said, "She sounds awful, but if he left a lot of debts—Of course that doesn't matter, since we don't expect to get anything..."

The number on East 37th Street, which had been in the papers, was between Park and Lexington. If there were any journalists on post they weren't visible, but daylight was gone, nearly five o'clock. Pushing the button marked Ashby in the vestibule, getting a voice asking who is it, and telling the grille our names, I pushed the door when the click came, and we entered.

It was a small lobby, aluminum-trim modern, and the elevator was a do-it-yourself. I pushed the "3" button, we were lifted and emerged on the third floor, and there was the widow, leaning against the jamb of an open door.

"Double wake," she said. "I just thought that up." She focused on us as we approached. "I thought up another one too. My husband liked what the ads said, go now, pay later. Eat now, pay later. I thought up kill now, pay later. I like it. I hope you like it." She didn't move.

It had been fairly obvious on the phone that she was tight, and she must have had another

go. Under control and in order, she could have been a fine specimen, with big dark eyes and a wide warm mouth, but not at the moment. Elma had started to offer a hand but changed her mind. I said distinctly, "Mrs. Ashby, Miss Vassos. I'm Archie Goodwin. May we come in?"

"You're a surprise," she told Elma. "You're so little. Not teeny, but little. He liked big girls, like me, only he made exceptions. You've got a nerve, suing me for a million dollars. I ought to be suing you for what he spent on you. Did he give you a gold flower with a pearl in the middle? You haven't got it on. There was one in a Jensen box when I went there that morning, the day he got killed. Kill now, pay later. I like it. I hope you like it." She fluttered a hand. "Thank you for coming, thank you very much. I just wanted to look at you. My God, you're little."

I was smiling at her, a broad friendly smile. "About that gold flower with a pearl in the middle, Mrs. Ashby. That you saw on his desk Monday morning. You didn't expect Miss Vassos to be wearing that, did you?"

"Certainly not. They've got that one, the police. I told them I saw it there and they said they had it." Her eyes went back to Elma, with an effort.

"Of course you've got one. They all got one. Eighty bucks at Jensen's, sometimes more."

Elma parted her lips to say something, but I got in ahead. "I suppose your husband was in his room when you were there Monday morning, Mrs. Ashby? What time was it?"

"It was ten o'clock." She grinned at me. "You're a detective." She pointed a wobbly finger at me. "Answer yesh or no."

"Yes, but I'm not a cop."

"I know, I know. Nero Wolfe. Look here, if I'm high I know it. I know what I said and what I signed. I went there that morning at ten o'clock, and I knocked on the door, and he opened it, and I went in, and he gave me forty dollars, and I came out, and I went and bought a pair of shoes with the forty dollars because the accounts at the stores had been stopped."

She straightened up, swaying a little, reached and caught the edge of the door, backed up, and swung the door shut with a loud slam.

I could have stuck a foot in to stop it, but didn't bother. The shape she was in, it would have taken more than intelligence guided by experience to sort her out, and I already had a better fact than I had expected to get in that she had been in Ashby's

room Monday morning and the cops knew it. Of course they had checked it, and if the clerk who sold her the shoes had confirmed her timetable she was out. Maybe. I followed Elma to the elevator.

In the taxi Elma said nothing until it stopped at Fifth Avenue for a red light, then turned her head to me and blurted, "It's so ugly!"

I nodded. "Yeah. I told you she'd be hard to take, but I had to have a look at her. That kill now, pay later, that's okay, but the trouble is who does the paying?"

"Did she kill him?"

"Pass. She says he left her nothing but debts."

"It's so ugly. I don't want to sue her. Couldn't we stop it, I mean for her?"

I patted her shoulder. "Quit fussing. The damage has been done, and whoever gets it now has got it coming. You came and asked Mr. Wolfe for something and you're going to get it, so relax. You have just convinced me, absolutely, that you never went very far with Ashby. Knowing you were going to meet Mrs. Ashby, you put your lipstick on crooked. Not that I had any real doubt, but that settles it."

She opened her bag and got out her mirror.

Paying the hackie at the curb

in front of the old brownstone, mounting the stoop with Elma, and using my key, I was surprised to find that the chain bolt was on, since it was only 5:30 and Wolfe would still be up in the plant rooms.

I was starting my finger to the button when the door opened and Fritz was there; he must have been in the hall on the lookout. He had his finger to his lips, so I kept my voice low to ask, "Company?"

He took Elma's coat and put it on a hanger as I attended to mine, then turned. "Three of them, two men and a woman, in the office. Mr. Mercer, Mr. Horan, and Miss Cox. The door is closed. I don't like this, Archie, I never do, you know that, having to watch people—"

"Sure. But if they brought a bomb it won't go off till they leave." I didn't bother about my voice since the office was soundproofed, including the door. "When did they come?"

"Just ten minutes ago. Mr. Wolfe said to tell them to come back in an hour, but they insisted, and he said to put them in the office and stay in the hall. I told him I was making *glace de viande*, but he said one of them is a murderer. I want to do my share, you know that, Archie, but I can't make good *glace de viande* if I have to be watching murderers."

"Certainly not. But he could be wrong. It's possible that Miss Vassos and I have just been interviewing the murderer, who is plastered." I turned to Elma. "This could be even uglier, so why don't you go up to your room? If you're needed later, we'll let you know."

"Thank you, Mr. Goodwin," she said and headed for the stairs. Fritz made for the kitchen, and I followed. He went to the big table, which was loaded with the makings of meat glaze, and, after getting the milk from the refrigerator and pouring a glass, I went to the small table against the wall, where the house phone was, and buzzed the plant rooms.

"Yes?"

"Me. Miss Vassos has gone to her room and I'm in the kitchen. Report on Mrs. Ashby." I gave it to him. "So it's just as well I wasn't supposed to bring her; I would have had to carry her up the stoop. Notice that I didn't pry it out of her that she was there Monday morning, she tossed it in. Verdict reserved. Any instructions about the company in the office?"

"No."

"Do you want me up there?"

"No. I've been interrupted enough." He hung up.

The genius. If he had a program beyond a fishing party, which I doubted, I could guess my part as we went along. I finished the milk, taking my time, and went to the alcove in the hall and slid the panel, uncovering the hole. On the alcove side the hole is an open rectangle; on the office side it is hidden by a picture of a waterfall which you can see through from the alcove.

John Mercer, president of Mercer's Bobbins, Inc., was leaning back in the red leather chair, patting the chair arms with his palms. His white hair was thin but still there, and he looked more like a retired admiral than a bobbin merchant. Fritz had put yellow chairs in front of Wolfe's desk for the other two. They were talking in the low voices people use in a doctor's waiting room, something about a phone call that had or hadn't come from some customer.

Philip Horan was broad-shouldered and long-armed, with a long bony face and quick-moving brown eyes. Frances Cox was a big girl, a real armful, but her poundage was well distributed. Nothing about her smooth smart face suggested that she had been through three tough days, though she must have been.

I stayed at the hole, sizing

them up, until the sound came of the elevator, then rounded the corner to the office door, opened it, and stayed there as Wolfe entered. He crossed to his desk, stood, and sent his eyes around. He fixed them on Mercer and spoke.

"You are John Mercer?"

"I am." It came out hoarse, and Mercer cleared his throat. "Miss Frances Cox. Mr. Philip Horan. We want—"

Wolfe cut him off. "If you please." I had gone to my desk, and he sent me a glance. "Mr. Goodwin." He stayed on his feet. "I question the propriety of this, Mr. Mercer. Miss Vassos has brought an action at law against you three, and communication should be between her counselor and yours. I'm a detective, not a lawyer."

Mercer had straightened up. "Your attorney told mine that you had told Miss Vassos to bring the action."

"I did."

"And that she's here in your house."

"She is. But you're not going to see her."

"Isn't that a little high-handed?"

"No. It's merely circumspect. She has resorted to the law to right a wrong; let the lawyers do the talking."

"But her lawyer won't talk! He says he won't discuss it

until you have gone further with the investigation!"

Wolfe's shoulders went up an eighth of an inch and down. "Very well. Then what are you doing here? Did your attorney tell you to come?"

"No. We're here to tell you there's nothing to investigate. Have you seen the afternoon paper? The *Gazette*?"

"No."

"It's on the front page. Inside are pictures of us and Inspector Cramer, and you. That kind of sensational publicity is terrible for a respectable business firm, and it's outrageous. All we've done, we've answered the questions the police asked us, investigating a murder, and we had to. What is there for you to investigate?"

"A murder. Two murders. In order to establish the ground for Miss Vassos' action for slander I need to learn who killed Mr. Ashby and Mr. Vassos. It seems discreet and proper for Miss Vassos' attorney to decline to discuss it with your attorney until I have done so."

"But that's ridiculous! Who killed Ashby and Vassos? *You* learn that? The police already have! My attorney thinks it's just a blackmailing trick, and I think he's right!"

Wolfe shook his head. "He's wrong; attorneys often are. He doesn't know what I know, that

the police have *not* identified the murderer. The point is this: whoever killed those men is almost certainly responsible for the defamation of Miss Vassos' character, and I'm going to expose him. The actions brought by her are merely a step in the process, and manifestly a potent one, for here you are, you and Miss Cox and Mr. Horan, and it is highly likely that one of you is the culprit."

Mercer gawked at him. "One of *us*?"

"Yes, sir. That's my working hypothesis, based on a supportable conclusion. You may reject it with disdain and go, or you may stay and discuss it."

"You don't mean it. You *can't* mean it!"

"I can and do. That's what I'm going to investigate. The

only way to stop me would be to satisfy me that I'm mistaken."

"Of course you're mistaken!"

"Satisfy me."

Mercer looked at Philip Horan and Frances Cox. They looked back and at each other. Miss Cox said, loud, "It *is* blackmail." Horan said, "We should have brought the lawyer." Miss Cox said, "He wouldn't come." Mercer looked at Wolfe and said, "How do you expect us to satisfy you?"

Wolfe nodded. "That's the question." He sat, brought the chair forward, and swiveled. "Conceivably you can, and speedily; there's only one way to find out. Mr. Horan. Did Mr. Vassos ever shine your shoes?"

(continued on page 137)

CRIMINALIMERICK

HE DOESN'T EAT CROW, EITHER

by D. R. BENSEN

Nero Wolfe has a palate unerring
For *cuisine* that is *haute*, often daring,
But rejects with disdain
And expressions of pain
Any offers to serve him red herring.

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a NEW Rand story by
EDWARD D. HOCH

Even Rand, the head of the Department of Concealed Communications, better known as the Double-C man, takes an occasional vacation—to get away from “the spying business.” Here he is drifting down the Thames with Leila Gaad, who has shared some of his Egyptian adventures, when—you’ve guessed it—strange things begin to happen. Can any detective (and Rand is more of a detective these days than a counterspy) ever really take a vacation, ever really get away from his work? Or is every detective—at least, in fiction—on a perpetual “busman’s holiday”? . . .

THE SPY WHO TOOK A VACATION

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Rand was waiting at Heathrow when Leila Gaad’s plane touched down after the flight from Cairo. When he saw her passing through customs he recognized her immediately, even though they hadn’t seen each other in more than a year. She was still the small dark-haired young woman he remembered from their Egyptian adventures, with her high handsome cheekbones and deep dark eyes that seemed always to be mocking him.

“How good to see you again,

Rand,” she said, giving him a quick sisterly kiss. “It’s been too long.”

“It has indeed. I hope to make up for it.” He helped with her luggage and took her to his car in the airport parking lot.

“Are we going into London?” she asked.

“Only long enough to get you settled. I promised to show you the British countryside and that’s what I’m going to do.” He gave her a quick smile. “There’s no better place to start a Nile mermaid than with a trip down the Thames.”

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She made a delightful face. "Isn't it all oily and polluted?"

"Not the Upper Thames. We'll motor up to Abingdon and take a boat down as far as Hampton Court, making plenty of stops along the way. It's a fine trip of four or five days and you'll really get to see a charming part of English country living."

"Can Double-C spare you that long?" she asked with a grin.

"I'm on a week's holiday. Concealed Communications is the furthest thing from my mind."

"Good!"

They'd shared three adventures together in as many years, all in Leila's Egypt during those dark days when the Russians were pouring men and money into the region. Though the Russians were now gone, the tensions of the latest Arab-Israeli War remained. Leila finally left her position at the University of Cairo to spend a summer in England, perhaps in hopes of finding a teaching job at a British university.

After a few quick hours at the London flat Rand had rented for her, they were off to Abingdon by car. They were early enough to beat the afternoon traffic, and Rand filled the time with relaxed conversation about British politics and the

election the following day. "You'll miss voting if you're away," Leila observed.

"Small loss. There's no real contest in my district. It's quite firmly Tory."

"Tory?"

"Conservative," he explained with a chuckle. "They used to be called Tories a long time ago."

"There's so much to learn about your country."

"It's really yours too. You told me once your mother was Scottish."

"And so she was, but I've spent my life in Egypt."

It was pleasant talking to her, pointing out the familiar sights of the English countryside, seeing them with a new eye because of it. He was a world away from his cluttered office at Double-C, and he almost resented it when she asked, "How is the spying business these days?"

"Terrible, for me. Taz has retired in Moscow, the government has cut our staff, everyone talks of détente."

"In my part of the world men still fight and die."

"Yes."

"But it no longer concerns Britain?"

"It concerns us, but there are so many other problems. We are caught in a very tight economic situation."

She sighed and leaned back on the seat. "Rand—"

"I wish you'd call me Jeffery."

"Very well—Jeffery. But let's not talk shop—not this week. I shouldn't have asked you about the spying business."

"That's all right." He smiled and touched her hand, then braked the car to a halt. They'd arrived. They were in Abingdon.

The boat he'd rented for the week was a handsome old 28-foot inboard of a type known as a Thames Slipper Stern because of the fact that the stern dipped almost to water level. There was a small cockpit, big enough for three, with a canvas top that folded back when not needed. "Like it?" he asked.

"Love it! We're going down the river in this?"

He nodded. "About forty miles."

"I didn't realize the Thames was so narrow up here."

In truth it seemed less than fifty yards wide. "That's what makes it so pleasant. It doesn't really widen out till you're past Windsor Castle."

They cast off the lines and drifted into the gentle current. "What's upstream?" she wanted to know.

"Oxford. Want to go up and see about a teaching position?"

"No, thanks. Not on holiday!"

Her specialty was archeology and she had pursued it from the bottom of the Nile to the top of the Great Pyramid. Now, as they headed down the sun-drenched river at the maximum allowable speed of about five miles an hour, she took a great interest in the big old Tudor and Victorian homes that stood almost at the water's edge.

It was nearly the end of June, and many of the estates had their own crafts in the water, tied to the concrete retaining walls that separated green grass from blue water. Most were modern luxury cruisers of the sort one found at the better clubs and marinas, but a few were refurbished steamboats with great smokestacks coming up through their middle.

"Such a variety of crafts!" Leila marveled. "There's a houseboat!"

"I could have rented one of those, but I suspected you'd rather spend your nights on land, in some of our quaint country inns."

"And right you were."

He pulled in at the next landing and they went to dinner at an inn called The Upper Angler. Over cocktails Leila said, "I'm amazed that the Thames could be so peaceful and lovely. It's rather more like a small

canal than a great river."

"It's very much like a canal. In fact, we'll be passing through some locks farther downstream."

There was a brief commotion from the bar area, and a man in a tweed jacket was hustled out. As he passed near their table on the porch he muttered, "I thought there was free speech in this country!"

"What's the trouble, sir?" Rand asked, recognizing the man's American accents.

"They don't want any political comments by foreigners in here," he said. His sandy hair was rumpled and a seam in his tweed jacket had split as the bartender pushed him out.

"The election's heating up," Rand observed with a grin. "Here, why not join us? They shouldn't mind you staying out on the porch."

The man drew over a chair and sat down. "Thanks, old man. Glad to see a few of you people are still civilized. My name's William Sanders. I'm a yacht broker." He fished in a wallet for a business card as Rand introduced himself and Leila.

"I'd say this is the right spot for yacht brokerage," Rand observed.

"Well, yes, except that the big profits come with the big yachts, and the really big ones

can't sail on the river this far up. Still, it's a good living buying and selling 'em."

"I'd say it was a very American sort of occupation," Leila commented.

He glanced at her, wondering how she'd meant the remark, but didn't pursue it, saying instead to Rand, "I hope this election is over soon."

"Tomorrow," Rand said.

"Isn't the beginning of summer an odd time for elections?"

"When the government here loses a vote of confidence, a new election is called. It can happen at any time. But at least the campaigns are short."

"Does everyone stay up late to watch the returns on TV, like back in the States?"

"In London they do, but not in some of the towns and villages. In the smaller places the votes often aren't counted till the following morning. The ballot boxes are locked in a cell at the local jail overnight."

"How quaint!"

Rand smiled. "It's England. Here, join us in a drink."

They chatted for a half hour, till the food arrived. Then the American excused himself with a little bow to Leila and vanished into the dusk. "He seemed quite nice," she said after he'd gone. "I can't imagine that mean bartender throwing him out!"

"These country inns like peace and quiet. What they don't like is an American sounding off about local politics."

"That's England too, I suppose."

Rand smiled. "After dinner I'll show you some more of it."

Morning came early to England in late June. It seemed barely four o'clock when the sun was already streaming through Rand's window at the inn. In his London apartment he had a heavy drape to guard against such intrusion, but here he was at the mercy of the sun.

He rolled over, saw that the door to Leila's connecting room was still closed, and thought about her. Finally he buried his head under the pillow and tried to go back to sleep. An hour later he was up, though, and he roused Leila Gaad for breakfast.

"But it's only five o'clock!" she protested.

"We can have breakfast and be on the river ahead of the crowd."

Once up and under way her protests faded. As their craft drifted away from shore and was caught by the gentle current of the river, she said, "This is lovely! Thank you for getting me up for it!"

They traveled downstream

past Dorchester and Wallingford, through the Goring Gap to Pangbourne, and then on into the medium-sized city of Reading. Always there were friendly people to wave from the shore, or other boats to honk a greeting. They lunched at another quiet country inn, across the river from a towering Gothic church that might have served as a cathedral in many cities.

After Reading, and before Henley, they chanced on a fellow traveler in distress. A middle-aged man was standing on the deck of his cabin cruiser appealing for aid. "Say there, old chap, I seem to be out of petrol. Quite embarrassing, really."

Rand guided their craft over to his side. "I've got an emergency can of fuel I can give you. It's only two gallons, but it'll get you to town."

"Many thanks, mister." His face showed the beginning growth of a gray beard, and Rand guessed him to be a desk bound Londoner just starting his holiday. So often they grew beards for two or three weeks, only to shave them off when they returned to the office. "My name's Creighton," he said, accepting the petrol can and holding out a greasy hand. "Dave Creighton."

"Jeffery Rand."

"Glad you came along. That's

some unusual boat you've got there."

"It's only rented," Rand answered defensively.

"Here, let me buy you and your wife a drink! That's the least I can do to repay you."

At Rand's side, Leila blushed nicely but didn't deny the relationship. "Sounds good," Rand agreed. "You work up a thirst on the river."

Dave Creighton proved an amiable drinking companion, even though his idea of buying them a drink was to invite them aboard his cabin cruiser while he filled plastic cups with some ice and cheap Scotch. "I'm a botanist at Corby College," he explained, scratching at the bristle on his chin. "Some teaching, some research. But for the summer I'm just relaxing."

"I'm in civil service," Rand said vaguely. "Desk job in London. My office overlooks the river and I've always wanted to vacation here."

"It's lovely this time of year," Creighton agreed. "I need more ice." He picked up the empty plastic bucket and hopped onto shore, heading for a nearby inn. "Back in a jiff."

When they were alone Leila asked, "Do you think he's a spy?"

"It would be just my luck to run into one on holiday!"

She glanced up and tugged at Rand's arm. "What's that man doing?"

A slim young fellow with long black hair and glasses had intercepted Creighton as he approached the inn. The young man pushed Creighton hard with the flat of his hand and knocked the empty ice bucket to the ground. Rand jumped off the boat and started across the lawn.

"Just get out of my way," the black-haired man was saying.

"Now look here! Keep your hands off or I'll call the police!" Creighton said.

"Call them!"

"What's the trouble?" Rand asked.

"This chap is trying to pick a fight," Creighton answered indignantly.

"We don't want trouble," Rand told the young man. "On your way now."

He peered at Rand from beneath black bushy brows, then took a step forward and swung a hard right fist at him. Rand stepped back, ducking the blow with ease, and grabbed the man's arm as it went by. He twisted and the man went down. "On your way, I said."

Rand waited to see if the man would rise, but he stayed sitting on the grass.

"Tried to pick a fight for no reason," Creighton said. "Just

came up and shoved me!"

"You know him?"

"Never saw the bloke before."

"Come back," Rand said. "We can get your ice elsewhere."

They remained with Dave Creighton as the day lengthened into evening. When he finally departed, Leila Gaad summed up her reaction to him. "He's more British than you are!"

Rand smiled. "Many people are."

They had eaten at another of the seemingly perfect country inns, and as they were departing Leila suddenly gripped Rand's arm. "Isn't that the same man who tried to start the fight?"

Rand followed her gaze. "That's him, all right. Wonder what he's up to now."

The dark-haired young man was loitering near the front of the inn, as if waiting for something or someone. Rand paused to watch from a distance, pulling Leila back into the evening shadows. Some people were approaching the inn from the direction of the parking lot. The instant the young man saw them he whirled and hurled something—a rock or a brick—at the front window of the inn. There was a shattering of glass and a moment of general confusion.

"He smashed the window!" Leila exclaimed. "He must be mad!"

"Or high on drugs. I didn't smell any liquor on his breath."

"Should you stop him?"

"That seems already attended to," Rand said. And indeed three men from inside the inn, one of them the manager, had hurried out to seize the vandal. Within a few minutes a police car arrived.

"The excitement's over," Leila said, turning toward the river where they'd left the boat. They'd already decided to go a bit farther downriver before calling it a night.

"Odd," Rand muttered as he fell into step beside her.

"What's odd?"

"That man. The whole business. First he tried to pick a fight with Creighton, and now he breaks a window. There was a Chesterton story once about a priest—Father Brown, it was—who left a trail of petty crimes for the police to follow."

"Well, if he wanted the police he got them! They're taking him off to jail."

"Perhaps that's exactly what he wanted."

"Do you think so?"

"It seems to me he's tried at least twice to get himself arrested. This afternoon he even urged Creighton to call the police."

"But why would anybody want to be arrested?" Leila asked. "A small-town jail can't be the most pleasant place to spend a night."

"Especially not on election night," Rand said.

"What?"

"I'm just remembering something. I mentioned to you that some towns store the uncounted ballots in a jail cell overnight. I wonder if they do that here."

"Does it matter?"

Rand thought about the possibilities. "It just might. Come on, let's go back into town."

They found the small local jail without difficulty and there was no need for Rand to ask his question. As they watched, a car drove up to the door and three metal ballot boxes were removed from the trunk under police guard. A tall white-haired man walked up to watch the proceedings, and Rand guessed that he might well be one of the candidates. He verified it by asking a bystander.

"That bloke? That's Michael Wisbech. He's standing for Parliament in today's election."

"I thought it was," Rand said. "Think he won?"

"I should hope not! I voted for Ramsey."

Rand grunted sympathetically. "Could you point out the Chief Constable to me?"

"That would be Folkestone. I

don't see him. He must be inside."

"Thanks."

"What are you up to now?" Leila asked, tugging at his sleeve. "You're supposed to be on holiday, remember?"

"Holiday or not, if I have a suspicion of a crime it's my duty to report it."

"But there is no reason to suspect a crime," she argued.

"That man *wanted* to be arrested—I'm convinced of it. He wanted to spend the night in jail, and there has to be a reason for it. Suppose he was carrying tools hidden on his body—lock-picks and such. Suppose he plans to get out of his cell and into the cell where the ballot boxes are kept."

"Now you're guessing."

"Sure I'm guessing, but it's certainly a possibility."

"I think we'd best be on our way."

He ignored her and stopped a passing police officer. "Would it be possible for me to have a word with Chief Constable Folkestone?"

"Not unless it's an urgent matter, sir. He's pretty much tied up with this election business. May I be of assistance?"

Rand hesitated, then shook his head. "No. No, it was nothing important."

He caught up with Leila and she asked, "Well?"

"I changed my mind. It's probably a foolish idea."

"Shall we go back to the boat?"

"No," he decided. "Let's see if there's a room at the inn."

In the morning he was up early. Leila stirred on her pillow and mumbled, "You certainly are an early riser."

"I couldn't sleep. I'm going to see the Chief Constable."

"Not that again!"

"Afraid so. I can't let it pass."

She turned over. "Wake me when you get back."

There was more activity at the little town jail than he might have expected. People were already arriving to count the ballots, and the Chief Constable was in his office drinking a cup of steaming tea. He was a gnarled man with a frosty, weatherbeaten face that seemed to reflect a lifetime at sea.

"Constable Folkestone?" Rand asked from the doorway.

"Chief Constable," the man corrected, quietly but firmly. "What can I do for you?"

"I happened to witness the arrest of a man last evening," Rand began, and then went on to explain his suspicions.

Chief Constable Folkestone listened with interest. When Rand had finished he said, "Interesting story. You should have told me last night."

"Can you check it now?" Rand asked. "Can you make certain he hasn't tampered with the ballot boxes?"

Folkestone smiled humorlessly. "No chance of that! The prisoner's name is Edward Brecon, and he never left his cell. In fact, we found him dead in it this morning."

"Dead!"

"He was stabbed. We think the knife was thrown through the cell window from outside."

Over breakfast Leila was sympathetic. "You can't blame yourself for what happened, Jeffery. He might have been killed even if you'd gone to the Constable last night."

"But killed by whom? And why?"

Before she could venture an opinion Leila glanced up and saw a familiar face. William Sanders, the American yacht broker, was crossing the inn's dining room, apparently searching for an empty table. He saw Rand wave and came over to join them. "Did you hear the election results? Wisbech defeated Ramsey. Very close vote!"

"Was he the one you were arguing for the other night?"

"Damned right! I'm trying to sell Wisbech a yacht. That's why I'm here. He didn't want to buy till after the election."

"There was an odd sidelight to the vote counting," Rand told him. "The ballots were stored in the local jail overnight, and one of the prisoners was killed there, in his cell."

The American seemed interested. "You don't say? I hadn't heard about that." He had coffee with them, but seemed anxious to be on his way. "I have to find Wisbech," he explained. "See you both later."

"Do you think he will?" Leila wondered.

"What?"

"See us later?"

"Who knows? It's a small river."

"Are we ready to shove off?"

He thought about it. "Not quite yet. I'm going back to the jail. Something happened there last night and I'm curious to know what. Go down to the boat and work around it as if we're getting ready to shove off. I won't be too long."

There was still much activity in the jail area. Rand recognized the tall white-haired figure of Michael Wisbech, who emerged from the building to the scattered cheers of onlookers. As he passed close by, Rand said, "Congratulations on your victory."

His intent blue eyes turned to Rand. He studied him for just an instant before replying

with a simple, "Thank you."

When Wisbech had been driven away in a long black Rolls-Royce, Rand entered the jail, going directly to the Chief Constable's office. "It's you again," Folkestone said, looking up from his work. "What is it this time?"

"The same matter. The killing of this man Brecon." Rand decided to show his identification. "It may be a national security matter," he said, though he knew he was exaggerating.

Folkestone stroked his chin. "Well now, just how can I help?"

"I'd like to see the dead man's belongings—everything he had on him at the time of arrest."

"There was no identification. He gave his name and a London address when we arrested him. The only thing he was carrying was this little notebook, and we didn't even find it till after he was dead. Otherwise, there was only some money and a handkerchief."

Rand flipped through the little notebook. There was no name in it—nothing to show ownership. It seemed to be a record of financial transactions, of payments made or received. Near the back, on some blank pages, a few notes had been scrawled. The most interesting one read: *Cryptogams due*

Tuesday. Despite the misspelling, there could be no doubt of the meaning. Perhaps this was a job for Concealed Communications after all.

"I'll want to keep this," he told Folkestone.

"Have to sign a receipt. We do things by law here."

Rand signed for the notebook and left the jail, walking quickly down the front steps to the street. Then, as an afterthought, he strolled around the side of the building. He wanted to see if it was really possible to throw a knife through one of the barred windows. If it wasn't possible, he might have some more questions for Chief Constable Folkestone.

The window itself was easy to spot. It was on the ground floor, near the back of the building, and the broken glass had been boarded over. It was about eight feet above the ground, but Rand was willing to concede that the killer could have broken the glass with a stone to lure Brecon near the bars and then hurled the knife. It could have been done that way. Or it could have been done by someone in the cell with him.

"Mr. Rand?"

He turned at the sound of his name and confronted a bland, smiling young man wearing an open-necked sports shirt and carrying a copy of the London

Times. "Yes?" Rand answered.

"There's someone wants to talk with you. I have a car." Before Rand could refuse he saw the folded newspaper raise a bit, just enough to show the muzzle of a pistol pointed at him. "Please, Mr. Rand. You won't be hurt."

"I seem to have no choice."

He preceded the young man to a small waiting car. Another man, almost a duplicate of the first, sat behind the wheel. "No tricks now, Mr. Rand," he said. "We're friends."

"Sure you are." Rand leaned back on the seat. It was too soon to be really worried.

The little car sped through the morning sunlight, passing occasional farmers at work in their fields. They were traveling east, toward London, but before they'd gone very far the driver turned off onto a little-used side road. Another car was waiting some distance ahead, sheltered from the sun by a large shade tree.

"We're here," the driver said. "He's waiting for you."

Rand got out alone and walked toward the waiting car. A man was sitting in the rear seat. He opened the door and got in next to him.

"Well, Rand," a familiar voice said. "I hope you'll excuse all this hocus-pocus."

It was Hastings—Rand's im-

mediate superior in the complex structure of British Intelligence.

"This is certainly a surprise," Rand said, meaning it. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask the same of you. I thought you were on holiday."

"I am—cruising down the Thames with a friend."

"Ah! Then it's just by chance you stumbled onto this thing?"

"It is. In fact, I have no idea what the thing is. A man attracted my suspicions yesterday by going out of his way to be arrested. When I checked on him this morning I found he'd been killed in his cell during the night."

"I know," Hastings said glumly. "He was one of our men."

"One of *yours*?"

"I have other concerns besides overseeing your work in Concealed Communications, you know. My duties include internal security."

"Why did Brecon—or whatever his real name was—want to be arrested?"

"I have no idea," Hastings answered.

"Was it something about the election?"

"His assignment concerned one of the candidates. That's all I can say."

"You mean a British intelli-

gence agent was put in that jail overnight to tamper with the election results?"

"No, no, nothing like that!" Hastings quickly assured him.

"All right, I see I'm going to have to tell you the whole story. Or at least as much as we know. Brecon—we'll call him that—was on a special assignment. One of the candidates in yesterday's election is a businessman with somewhat shady connections. As you know, American companies are forbidden to sell certain strategic goods to Russia. This man buys them through a dummy corporation here in England, then resells them to the Russians. We can't arrest him for it, since he violates no British law, but he could become an embarrassment if he served in Parliament."

Rand remembered the man who had studied him outside the jail. "It's Wisbech, isn't it?"

"Yes," Hastings replied.

"And he won."

"He won," Hastings agreed, "and our man Brecon lost. Lost the hard way, with a knife in him."

"What about Ramsey, the other candidate?"

"He knows nothing about all this."

"You could have slipped him the information during the campaign."

Hastings flashed his eyes. "That wouldn't have been sporting."

"I see." It was the same old British way. "How did you learn I was in town?"

Hastings motioned toward the car behind them. "They spotted you at breakfast. You're quite well known in the business, you know."

"Did they have to use guns?"

"I suppose it was easier than an explanation. I said I was sorry."

"Now that I'm here, what do you want from me?"

"You're good at these things, Rand. As long as you're on the scene anyway, see what you can learn."

He thought of the notebook in his pocket. "Wisbech would need a contact—someone working for the Russians."

"Yes."

"And your man might have been onto him. If Wisbech couldn't be touched, his contact could be—as an unregistered agent of a foreign power."

"Does that explain why he got himself arrested?"

"It could. If he wasn't trying to stuff the ballot boxes himself, maybe he got arrested so he'd be there to prevent someone else from stuffing them."

"Someone else? That constable fellow?"

Rand shrugged. "Tell me

something—did anything about Brecon's mission involve cryptograms? Codes, ciphers, any sort of secret messages?"

"Not that I know of. Cryptograms are your department."

"They seem to be," Rand agreed, "even on holiday. Will you be staying in the area or returning to London?"

"Oh, it's back to London for me. I can leave you a man if you think you'll need him."

"No, thanks." He started to leave the car. "What about Brecon? Did he have a family?"

Hastings looked blank. "Don't really know. Have to check his dossier. We'll handle that end. Phone me when you find something."

"If I find something."

They shook hands and Rand walked back to the other car. The young men drove him back to town, and now the guns were out of sight. "Nice day, isn't it?" one of them said.

Leila was waiting on the river bank near their boat. "Where have you been? I was frantic!"

"It's a long story." He glanced toward the boat, seeing someone move in the cockpit. "We have company?"

"Dave Creighton. He stopped by to chat and I can't get rid of him."

Rand smiled. "He probably

wants a return on that Scotch he gave us." He walked to the river's edge and called a greeting.

Creighton poked his head up. "The lady was worried about you."

"I got tied up. There's some excitement at the jail. Remember that fellow who tried to pick the fight with you?"

"Sure do. Long black hair. Looked like a Commie."

"He got himself arrested last night and someone killed him in his cell."

"I'll be damned!" Creighton jumped ashore and joined Rand. "What do you make of it?"

"We saw him deliberately get himself arrested by throwing a rock through the window of the inn. My first thought was that he wanted to get himself arrested to be in the jail overnight with the uncounted election ballots."

"That so?" Creighton motioned downriver toward his own cabin cruiser. "Come aboard, old chap, and bring your wife. There's still some of that Scotch left over."

They followed him onto the boat and Leila relaxed in a convenient deck chair while he poured the drinks. "I thought you'd be far away by now," Rand said.

"Came back," Creighton answered with a grunt, handing

Rand a glass. "But what about this man who was killed? Anything to do with the election?"

"As I said, that was my first thought. Because why does someone go to all that trouble to spend the night in a little village jail?"

"Why indeed?" Creighton put down his glass and started the boat's motor. "Let's go for a bit of a spin. I'll bring you back here." He reached over the side to cast off the mooring lines.

"Well, I thought about it and I came up with another possibility," Rand admitted. "It explains everything—why he picked the fight with you and why he broke the window."

"Why?"

The boat was drifting slowly away from shore, catching the current of the river. "He broke the window to get himself arrested, all right—simply for protection. He knew someone was after him, and jail seemed the safest place. Unfortunately, it wasn't safe enough."

"But why start the fight with me? Same reason?"

Rand shook his head. "The fight with you was the key to the whole thing, once I tumbled to it. You see, the whole reason for it was so that he could pick your pocket—steal this little notebook you were carrying."

Dave Creighton's face hardened. "I'll just take that," he

said. A gun had appeared as if by magic in his hand. "I've killed once for it, and I'll kill again, if need be."

Leila was out of her chair in a flash, but not quite fast enough for Creighton. He hit out with his free hand, catching her on the shoulder and tumbling her to the deck. "Stay there!" he warned. Then, to Rand, he repeated, "Give me the notebook."

Rand held onto it. "You'd hardly let us live now, in any event."

"Do you know what's in it?"

"I've a pretty good idea. A list of money payments involving the just-elected Member of Parliament, Mr. Michael Wisbech. He's been dealing with the Russians, transshipping American strategic goods, and you've been the go-between, the paymaster."

"Smart," Creighton said. "You're smart for a civil servant."

"Perhaps I didn't describe my position fully enough," Rand answered with a grin. "I'm with a branch of British Intelligence. You chose the wrong boat to stop for gasoline."

They were still drifting downstream, the motor purring softly but the throttle unopened. Rand wondered if he planned to throw them over-

board. "I was unlucky," Creighton admitted. "Still, how did you know the notebook belonged to me?"

"It could have been the dead man's own, but I ruled that out quite quickly. He wasn't carrying a pencil, pen, or other writing implement. So why would he carry a notebook? I decided he'd gotten the notebook from someone. It was important to him, because he didn't surrender it when he was jailed. He kept it hidden on him. I think he figured the jail was the safest place for him and the notebook, till the next day.

"If he knew his killer would come after the notebook, that meant he'd stolen it. I remembered his tussle with you, and now I see the reason for it. You killed him with a knife through the barred window of the jail, hoping to recover the notebook later. Perhaps you posed as a next of kin this morning and the Constable told you I had the notebook. That's what brought you back to us. When I arrived just now you looked suspiciously as if you were searching our boat."

The cabin cruiser rode over a swell and suddenly another boat was cutting in front of it. "What's that?" Creighton rasped, swinging around.

"Just some friends," Rand announced. "Take him, Leila!"

She tackled him around the ankles as Rand dove for the gun. The other boat was alongside now, and Hastings' two young men were aboard. Rand could feel Creighton struggling beneath him still, and he caught the man's sleeve, feeling the hardness of steel there.

"Have you got him?" Leila asked.

"Get this knife out of his sleeve. It's probably a mate to the one that killed Brecon at the jail."

As the cabin cruiser edged into the shore, the young men came aboard to take over. Rand was startled to see Hastings with them too. "I thought you'd gone back to London."

"They told me what you were up to, so I decided to stay around. You should have mentioned Creighton when we talked."

"I got the idea while they were driving me back to town, and we stopped at the library to look up *cryptogam*. If the notebook belonged to Brecon's

killer, I figured that might tell me something. It did. Cryptogams have nothing to do with codes or ciphers. They're an old botanical division meaning plants without seeds, like ferns and mosses." Rand showed him the notebook. "This was a note for Creighton's botany class, and it told me the notebook was his for certain."

"You should have mentioned the notebook too," Hastings said darkly.

"We all have our secrets," Rand answered with a grin. Then, dropping his voice, he added, "There's an American around here trying to sell Michael Wisbech a yacht. Now he wouldn't be one of your people too, would he?"

Hastings cleared his throat. "You took care of Creighton. Leave Wisbech to us." Then, turning toward Leila, he beamed and said, "And this must be Leila Gaad! Jeffery's told me so much about you from the Egyptian days. I do hope you're enjoying our river."

"Q"

a **NEW** short story by

L. E. BEHNEY

It is nearly ten years since we published a story by L. E. Behney. What she has been doing in all those years, what has happened to her, why she stopped writing (if she did stop), we do not know. But even after the long silence L. E. Behney still retains her special "touch"—her feeling for the land and for the creatures of the land and for the people of the land . . .

DRY SPELL

by **L. E. BEHNEY**

The early morning sun, a blazing disk in a coppery sky, beat down on the shriveled land.

Abe Conners felt its heat on his bare sun-bleached head, on his burned dark face and arms, but he tried not think about it. He stood with the shotgun cradled on his arm, looking down at the carcass of his last milk cow.

Dessie had named her Buttercup, loving the fragile gray legs, the soft-coated creamy body, and dark lustrous eyes. She had been more of a pet than a farm animal.

If he'd fixed the fence better, kept her locked in the barn. He rubbed his face, feeling

the roughness of a three-day beard. He studied the barren sagebrush-dotted plain that sloped into the rolling foothills beyond his farm. Once the coyotes had hunted away from the farmlands, had been too timid to raid more than an isolated chicken coop; but now the rabbits and ground squirrels, their natural prey, were gone, driven out by the drought and hunted to extinction. A rabbit or a squirrel stew was better to fill a man's stomach than air—and that was all that was left for many. That and the buzzards.

They had lifted from the cow's carcass like a flight of dingy mourners when Abe

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came upon them. Now they perched on the dry sage or squatted on the baked ground, waiting, craning their red-wattled necks, fluffing the feathers of their wings with the rustle of stiff silk. Others were coming to the feast, slowly spiraling, watching him.

Abe raised the shotgun. His face twisted with fury. Then he lowered the weapon. Only two shots left. No use wasting lead on buzzards. The meat was unfit. His empty stomach rolled and bitterness filled his mouth.

He looked again at the carcass but there was nothing to salvage. The bones were gnawed white in the sun. Only shreds of flesh clung to the tattered hide and the blowflies were already swarming.

He turned away and went back to the house.

The kitchen still held a trace of the faint coolness that had come before dawn.

Dessie turned from the workbench below the window. She saw her husband's face and her eyes widened.

He leaned the shotgun in a corner and sat heavily at the table. "The cow," he said. "Coyotes got her."

She stared at him. "Coyotes? What are we going to do, Abe? No milk."

His tight mouth stretched in what he hoped was a confident

smile. "Don't you worry none, honey, we'll manage."

"We'd better," she said tonelessly. Then her voice rose hysterically. "Do you know there's nothing in this house to eat and no money either?"

"I know," he said, "an' I been thinkin' 'bout it, day an' night, tryin' to figure out what to do. We've gotta hang on just a little longer. It's August now. The rains'll start in September. I can borrow money then to get started again. I'm a good worker. This is the best land in the valley. Three dry years in a row. Next year's gotta be good."

"Why does it?" she cried. "Three dry years—we could have a dozen! We could all dry up and blow away for all you care! Working in town wasn't good enough for you! You couldn't get along with Papa, your pride wouldn't let you. We had to come out to this God-forsaken place and take up land. I hate it, I hate it!" She began to cry, great dry sobs that shook her thin body.

He got up slowly and put his arms around her. He stroked her lifeless hair, remembering its thick soft darkness on the night of their marriage, remembering the sweet smoothness of her white skin that was now brown and wrinkled, feeling the bulk of her belly against him, the child who

would be born before winter.

"Remember the way it was when we first came here?" he whispered. "The fields all green with wheat an' corn, the cattle fat an' lazy in the pasture. That's the way it was and I swear to you it will be again when it rains."

"I didn't mean to shout so," she said, "like some—some shrew, but I'm so afraid."

"I know," Abe said, "I know. I'm goin' into town. I'll borrow a little more on the place. You can go on back home till things get good again."

She moved protestingly.

"I don't want ya t' go either," he said, "but I think it's better for you an' the baby. We gotta think about him. You go an' get all well an' strong. I'll send for you, quick as I can." He gently put her in a chair. "I'll shave an' get a clean shirt on. Seems like if a man looks like he needs money he can't get it."

"No," Alonzo Prestor said. He slapped his soft white hand on the polished desk top. "No, Conners, I'm sorry. I've already loaned you more than your property is worth."

"All I want is forty dollars," Abe said, his mouth dry as dust, "less if ya' can't give me that, enough t' buy a little grub an' pay my wife's way back East on the bus. I'm good for

twice what you've loaned me, Mr. Prestor."

"I'm sorry, Conners," the banker said with finality. His plump fingers caressed his tight waistcoat impatiently. He looked beyond Abe and nodded. "Be with you in a minute, Harris. I have a dinner appointment with one of the bank directors."

"I've got to have some money, Mr. Prestor," Abe said desperately. "I don't aim t' take up much of your time, but it's for Dessie, my wife. Our boy died of a fever last year. Dessie's expectin'. She's got t' have food an' care."

Prestor stood up, a short fat little man in a well-cut black broadcloth suit. His eyes were cold. "Get a job," he said brusquely. "Go to work!"

"Do you think I'd be here if I hadn't tried?" Abe asked. "I've been t' every ranch in the country, every store in town. There's no work. The ranchers got all they can do t' keep their own men. The railroad crew is full up. There's nothin'."

"Move out. Most of your neighbors have."

"They left when they still had somethin' left t' move with. They didn't try t' hang on. I got nothin'."

"Then they were smarter than you are. I can't help you. The bank directors gave me my

orders—no more loans to farmers. I'm not a hard-hearted man, it's just that I can't do it."

Abe stood up. He towered over the smaller man. His big fists clenched. "All I'm askin' for is a chance," he said. "I'm begging you—an' I'm not a begging man, Mr. Prestor. If the bank won't do it, give me a personal loan. I'll pay it back. Double. I swear I will. When the rains come—"

The banker glared up at him. "The rains may not come for years, Conners. I'm not responsible for the weather. You damn dirt farmers came in here, took up good range land, now you come sniveling to me because the bank won't throw good money after bad. Well, I won't either! Good day!"

He hustled into an inner office, mopping his perspiring face with a silk handkerchief.

"This way, please." The clerk, Harris, put his hand, with evident reluctance, on Abe's arm.

It had been a little cooler in the bank with its high-ceilinged gilt-and-marble elegance. On the street the sun's blazing heat shimmered over the brick and frame buildings, the warped and splintered board sidewalks, the ankle-deep dust of the roadway.

Abe leaned against the marble facing of the bank's doorway. He had walked the three

miles into town. Supper last night had been a thin gruel of flour and water. He had made Dessie drink the scant bowl of Buttercup's milk. There had been no breakfast. His stomach growled and cramped.

The banker, wearing a stiff-brimmed black hat, came out of the door beside him and walked briskly down the sidewalk to the hotel. A horse and a stylish red-wheeled buggy stood in the heat before the brick-fronted building. The horse, a roan gelding, too hot to flick its docked tail at the swarming flies, stood head drooping against the check rein.

Abe pushed himself away from the wall and started down the street. He came to Eli Williams General Merchandise Emporium, peered into the fly-specked window a moment, then went inside triggering the clamor of a spring-mounted brass bell over the door.

Eli came out from behind the counter. He was wiping his ragged mustache with a red bandana and he belched loudly.

"Got some money, Abe?"

"No."

"Figured you wouldn't."

The two men faced each other like adversaries in the hot dusty leather-smelling gloom of the store.

"No," Eli said. He shook his narrow head. His thin pale hair

was plastered with sweat over his high forehead like a shiny second skin. "No, I'm sorry, Abe, I can't. I ain't got enough cash t' buy my stock now. They want their money. No credit fer them fellas. I gotta sell fer cash. Much as I'd like t' let ya have some stuff."

Abe moved past him slowly. He took from the shelves small bags of beans and flour, a can of lard, a slab of bacon, a few potatoes from a bin. He stacked the food on the counter and turned to the storekeeper.

"You figure it up, Eli. I'll pay you quick as I can."

"I told ya I can't give ya any more credit, Abe. Nobody in town's got any money nowdays. Didn't ya see the empty stores? People think 'cause I got some groceries on my shelves I'm rollin' in money. Well, they're wrong. This is the last month fer me less'n things get better."

The little storekeeper blinked and wiped his nose on the red bandana. "You see, Abe," he said pleadingly, "why I can't sell ya any more grub on time. I'm sorry."

"We got nothin' t' eat," Abe said. "It's money t' you, it's more to us."

"Sorry, Abe."

"Well," Abe Conners said heavily, "I'll have t' take it anyway."

"The hell you will!" Eli Wil-

liams shouted. He rushed behind his counter. "I've got a shotgun back here. I'll use it if I hafta!"

Abe studied the quivering little man. He shook his head. "You won't shoot me, Eli."

"I'll have the law on you! Ya can't come in here an' steal a man's property!"

"It ain't stealin' if I aim t' pay for it."

The bell on the door jangled.

The man who entered was as tall as Abe and as thin. His clothing hung loosely on his big frame. He wore a heavy revolver in a worn holster and, pinned to his flannel shirt, a tarnished silver star.

His gray eyes swept the store and fixed on the two men.

"Somethin' wrong, Eli?" he asked quietly.

"Hello, Caleb," Eli Williams said nervously. His bony fingers fumbled with the items Abe had piled on the counter. "Abe, here—he—"

"Give him the credit, Eli," the sheriff said. "A man's gotta eat. You'll get your money."

"All right," the little storekeeper said, shrugging his thin shoulders. "It's just that I gotta make a livin'. Me an my family gotta eat too."

He figured hastily on a scrap of wrapping paper and transferred the figures to a lined tablet he took from a locked drawer.

"Sign here, Abe."

The sheriff leaned against the counter. "You walkin', Abe?" He nodded to Eli. "Put his stuff in a sugar sack. How's the wife, Abe? When's that baby comin'?"

"Dessie's doin' all right. We figure 'bout the last of October."

Abe looked directly at the sheriff. "Thanks," he said.

As the farmer left the store carrying the bulging sack, Caleb turned to the storekeeper.

"How much?" he asked.

"Came to three dollars and eighty-four cents."

The sheriff fished four silver dollars from his pants pocket and laid them on the counter.

"You shouldn't oughta do that," Eli Williams said. His fingers closed over the coins. "This makes near ten dollars you've paid out fer them dirt scratchers this week. You ain't a rich man, Sheriff."

"I eat lean," the sheriff said, "and I ain't got a wife or kids. You mark that paid and I'll take my change."

The road out of town ran by Alonzo Prestor's big white frame house. Abe had heard that Prestor hired a man to haul four barrels of water a day from Indian Springs to put on his lawn and flower garden.

The lawn was green and

smelled of fresh-cut grass and sun. Flowers bloomed in profusion behind a white picket fence. On the lawn in the shade of a locust tree a woman played with a small dog, tossing a ball and laughing prettily when the fuzzy little creature retrieved it. The woman had fine dark hair, a slender figure, and a creamy white skin well revealed by her lowcut short-sleeved dress. She glanced several times at Abe leaning on the fence and finally flounced into the house calling the dog after her.

Abe walked slowly around the house outside the picket fence. A shiny new surrey with a fringed and tasseled canopy top stood in the carriage house and a rangy high-bred sorrel whickered at him from the stable.

When he reached home, caked with sweat and dizzy with heat, he found Dessie lying asleep on the bed. Quietly he put the sack on the kitchen table and took the empty water bucket out to the pump. The pump handle was so hot he had to wrap his shirt around it to hold it. No need now to pump the tin tub full for the cow. A little scummy green water still puddled the tub bottom. Wasps clustered at the water's edge working their gauzy wings. He looked up. The brassy sky was

empty. The buzzards had finished their meal and were gone.

The pump sucked and caught. The water was cool from the earth's depths. But before the bucket was half full the pump sucked air. Yesterday it had almost filled the tub. Tomorrow, perhaps, it would be dry.

Abe watched the final drops strike the ringed surface of the water. Without the well they were really done for. He thought of Alonzo Prestor's cool green lawn, of the four barrels of water from Indian Springs.

The sun was burning his bare shoulders. He put his shirt on and carried the water bucket to the house.

He made a fire in the big cast-iron range, put a kettle of water on to heat, peeled potatoes, sliced bacon, started a pot of beans on the stove back, and put coffee on to boil.

"Oh, Abe!" Dessie stood in the doorway watching him with a look of incredulous joy, "You got the money!" She went to the table and began to dig through the packages. "Oh, darling, I was so hungry I thought I would die! I almost hoped I wouldn't wake up." She wiped her eyes with her hand, half laughing, half crying.

She looked almost young again, Abe thought.

She put her arms around him. "We'll both go to Papa's," she said happily. "You won't mind, will you, for a little while?"

"You remember what your papa said when we left? He told you we'd never get a penny from him as long as you stayed with me."

"Oh, Papa's an old grouch, but he never means half what he says. You don't know him like I do."

I know him too well, Abe thought, remembering the old man's blazing temper and vindictive hatred. But he had loved his daughter with a lonely old man's passion and he would accept her, alone—that he had made clear; and he had returned Dessie's letters unopened. Abe had gotten them at the post office in town and had never given them to his wife.

"It's been a hard life for you," Abe said. "Maybe your papa was right. I should never have brought you out here with me."

She tipped her chin at him. "I wanted to come, to be with you. Don't you care what Papa said. He'll change his mind when we get there. I'm not going without you, Abe."

"All right," he said. "We'll worry about it later. Right now you eat somethin' and rest. Maybe later you can pick out what you want t' take with you."

"We'll catch the bus in the morning. I've got t' go back into town tonight. Take care of some things."

It had been a long time since he'd had a full stomach, a longer time since he'd carried a handgun. The steel butt of the Colt gouged his side as he walked and he eased its weight in the waistband of his pants under his shirt.

The warm night air caressed his face with a satiny breath. Overhead the stars were coming out and in the east a full moon hung pale and remote like an accusing eye. The night was still except for the distant chorus of the coyotes in the sagebrush flatland toward the hills. He walked easily, his heavy work shoes plowing through the thick dust.

Before the lingering twilight had left the western sky he reached the outskirts of the town. It was late, after nine o'clock, and most of the houses were dark. Only a few dully glowing windows marked the dark rectangles of the buildings.

The Prestor house was dark. Moonlight gave a ghostly radiance to the white-painted pillars and ornately trimmed eaves of the porches.

Abe circled the picket fence, opened the gate, crossed the

lawn, and went up the steps to the front veranda. He tried the screened front door and it opened at his touch with a faint whine of well oiled hinges. He pulled off his heavy work shoes and found himself in the musty, perfumed warmth of the hallway.

He wondered about the dog that had been playing so gaily with the woman on the lawn that afternoon. Perhaps the woman had been a visitor and not a member of the Prestor family; at least the dog did not bark, and the house was silent except for the slow and studied ticking of a clock in the hall.

In the luminous gloom he could see the dark shapes of paintings, the bulk of furniture, and the outlines of doorways against the lighter walls. His footsteps were muffled in the softness of deep-piled rugs as he searched the rooms. He was looking for a table or a desk. A man who lived like Prestor—there had to be money somewhere in the house.

Finally, in a small room by the stairs, he found a rolltop desk and opened it. His searching fingers found pigeonholes stuffed neatly with papers and, behind a center panel, a small locked drawer.

Abe took out his pocket knife and carefully pried open the drawer. Inside were coins and a

roll of currency. He put the money in his pocket and closed the drawer and the desk.

He straightened and turned to leave. The stairs behind him creaked, then a match scraped and sprang to sputtering light.

Abe swung around. Alonzo Prestor, wearing a flannel nightgown and a knit night cap, stood on the stairs holding a flaring match in one hand and a cocked nickel-plated revolver in the other.

"Conners," he said icily. "I might have known it was you. Stand still and put your hands up!" Keeping his eyes on Abe he shouted up the stairs, "Sarah! Sarah! Come down here and bring a light! Hurry up!"

A fat middle-aged blonde woman wearing a purple-striped wrapper and with her hair in stocking curlers came timidly down the stairs carrying a lighted lamp. She stared at Abe with round frightened eyes that looked like yellow marbles in the lamp's warm glow.

"Set the lamp on the table," the banker ordered. "Not there, stupid, where I can see something! Go tell John to run get the sheriff!"

When she had pattered out of the room Prestor said, "Thought you were pretty smart, didn't you? Because I wouldn't give you the money

you decided to try to steal some, didn't you? Well, let me tell you, this'll put an end to your thievery!"

"I have to have it," Abe said through stiff lips. "There wasn't any other way. I meant t' take only what I have t' have. You'll get it all back with any interest you want t' charge."

"I'm not a soft-headed philanthropist," the banker said. "If I were, I wouldn't stay in business long. People like you should be in jail and that's where you're going!"

"What about my wife? Somebody's got t' look after her."

"Your wife is not my concern. You should have thought of her before you broke into my house to rob me. You're worse than a thief, you're a beggar. Hold still, Conners, I'm a good shot!"

Abe saw the banker's eyes narrow, the revolver muzzle steady, and as he lunged aside Prestor fired. Abe's Colt was in his hand and the butt slammed back against his palm. The roar of the shots was a thunder in the room.

Prestor made a choking sound and clutched his chest. Blood bubbled from his mouth and gushed between his fingers. His thick body thudded back against the stairwell. Somewhere in the house the woman screamed.

Abe leaped across the room and down the hall. He shoved open the screen door, snatched up his shoes, and straightened to face Caleb Trent.

"Drop the gun, Abe," the big man said sadly. "I don't want to have t' kill you."

The money Abe had taken from Prestor's desk made a small pile on the sheriff's cluttered desk.

Caleb poked at it questioningly. "This money yours, Abe? Nearly fifty dollars here."

Abe Conners looked at him levelly.

"It's mine," Abe said.

"You want it t' go to your wife, I reckon."

"I do, and I'd be obliged if you'd see her onto the bus back to her folks."

The sheriff nodded. "I'll do it," he said and put the money into the desk. He motioned his prisoner toward the cells in the backroom.

In late September, the morning that Abe Conners was hanged, the rains began.

"Q"

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a NEW Petrella story by
MICHAEL GILBERT

first publication in the United States

Judge Vereker was under sentence of death—by assassination. The apartment house in which he lived had been converted into a veritable fortress, and Detective Sergeant Petrella himself spent ten hours a day, without relaxing for a minute, watching the state of siege, making sure the Judge was so closely guarded that no possible attempt could be made on his life. And yet—

DEATH WATCH

by MICHAEL GILBERT

During his tour of duty at Highside, Detective Sergeant Petrella encountered quite a number of memorable people, but he never remembered anyone quite like Judge Vereker.

James Vereker was an official of the Colonial Service and had held judicial office in Palestine, in Kenya, and, more recently, in Cyprus. He was a small, cheerful, birdlike person who dragged a clubfoot behind him, and possessed the whole of a right hand and part of a left hand—the missing fingers had

been blown off by an ingenious greetings telegram sent him on his fiftieth birthday by Irgun Zvai Leumi. Vereker was a bachelor; which may have been as well in all the circumstances. When Petrella encountered him, he was under sentence of death.

The Judge told him so himself, perched on the fender seat in his cosy, second-story flat in the new block on Heath Hill, while Petrella sat, ill at ease, in the single armchair.

"They're an offshoot—a sort of foreign working party—of

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Anorthotikou Komonia Ergezoniounou Laou. That's really another name for local Communist party."

"Just why should they want to kill you, sir?"

"Expediency," said the Judge. "Of course, that's not what they say. The ostensible reason is revenge. I sentenced one of their members, George Antinas, to death for terrorism. They made a terrific fight to save him. It was last year. You may have read about it."

Petrella nodded. Like everyone else in England, he had read about it. Half the press had made out that George Antinas, who had spent most of his life in England, was a young William Tell; the other half had presented him as a vicious paid assassin. Overpaid, apparently, for he had badly bungled his last job, which was the blowing up of a police station, and had fallen alive into the hands of the men he had set out to destroy.

"My own theory," said Judge Vereker, "is that the whole thing had precious little to do with politics. George's employers had got tired of him. Both he and his brother, Antar, were wild young men, and not always discreet. So they sent George on this job—but tipped off the police in advance. Thus they had the best of both

worlds. George was abated; and they got themselves a useful martyr."

"I should have thought they had enough martyrs already," said Petrella.

"Timing," said the Judge. "They want an up-to-date martyr. One they can use right now. As I said, it's purely a question of expediency. If they succeed in murdering me, in some spectacular way, in the next few weeks, it will strengthen the hands of the extremists on both sides. By November I should guess the best time for them will be over."

He stroked his tortoiseshell cat with his sound hand. He might, Petrella thought, have been talking about oysters coming in and going out of season.

"Who are they?" said Petrella.

"The leader is, I think, an Egyptian. His animosity against this country has nothing to do with recent events. I doubt if he harbors animosity. He is a professional terrorist, and his present name is David. Incidentally, he is one of the finest amateur conjurers in the world."

David, noted Petrella, *conjurer*.

"If he is working with his usual number two, that will be Stefanos, a Greek engineer,

who specializes in electrical devices."

"Stefanos," said Petrella. "Electrician. And the third?"

"Oh, the third, I should think, would be George's brother, Antar. There would be a truly Hellenic touch of poetic justice in that, don't you think? Also, Antar, like George, was brought up in England and looks and speaks like an Englishman. That could be useful to them in their operations."

As Petrella sat, some days later, in the porter's cubicle, watching the clock with one eye and the main door with the other, he was thinking of David and Stefanos and Antar, implacable figures of Grand Guignol. David with his long, strong, conjurer's fingers. Stefanos with his engineer's skill; and Antar—Antar who might appear in any form at any moment, beneath some commonplace mask, a brother's blood crying out for vengeance.

They were known to be in England. The Special Branch had confirmed it. And they were thought to be operating from the area of the docks where they had friends. But, apart from that, there was nothing but speculation.

A quarter to midnight. The last pubs had shut some time before and thrown their noisy

contingents into the streets. In eight and a quarter hours' time, Petrella's relief would arrive, and he could go home and sleep. Ten hours was a long spell, when you couldn't relax for a minute of it.

Heath Hill Mansions was not a difficult fortress to defend. It was a great deal easier than a private house. The Judge had a flat on the second story of the annex. On the ground floor lived a South African dentist. Above the dentist a woman journalist, above the journalist the Judge, and above the Judge a practicing faith healer. All the tenants had been there considerably longer than the Judge; and all had been carefully and unostentatiously checked, with the result that the faith healer was now strongly suspected of being a receiver of stolen goods. Such were the unexpected by-products of criminal investigation.

A single main staircase led to the flats, and ended in a front hall conveniently commanded by the porter's cubbyhole, in which Petrella sat watching the clock. This part of the block was L-shaped; and in the angle of the L at the back was a small walled courtyard, the gate to which was locked at night. In ordinary times an iron fire-escape staircase led up

from this courtyard to the backdoors of the flats; but, by arrangement, the bottom section of it was removed at night. After all, as Superintendent Haxtell pointed out, there was very little chance of a fire starting undetected if they had a policeman on the premises.

What else, thought Petrella. There was a small service lift beside the back staircase, which was locked during the hours of darkness, and was in any event far too small for the smallest terrorist to use. And to baulk assault from the roof with packets of explosive swung from cords—a method developed in Palestine—a fine wire mesh had been fixed across all the windows of the Judge's flat.

A car—no, not a car, a heavy truck—rumbled past the end of the road, slowed for a moment, then changed its mind, and went on, picking up speed.

Could any precautions be effective against determined, accomplished killers? Were there not a dozen ways into the fortress, even without physical access? The vegetables, the groceries, the milk. All carefully examined, it was true. Likewise the letters and parcels, the books from the library, the shirts from the laundry.

But the men they were up against were ingenious and ruthless. They had learned the

art of secreting a damaging charge of explosive in a minimum of space. Petrella thought of the story the Judge had told him of the Inspector of Constabulary, who had lived in a similar state of siege for three months in Haifa. And how, in the end, Irgun had bribed or terrorized the local cobbler, and repaired the Inspector's shoes with hollow heels full of explosive which had blown both his legs off the first time the Inspector wore them.

Or the case of the Governor's bodyguard, whose ammunition pouches had been filled with explosive timed to go off at the moment when the Governor was inspecting them; a plan which had failed because the Governor, on this occasion and most unusually, was two minutes late.

"I can tell you an even sadder story," Judge Vereker had said, swinging his legs and looking like a mischievous boy. "About my predecessor in Cyprus. It was not a story which received any publicity. AKEL had sworn to kill him. He was closely guarded, more closely than I am here. Perhaps too closely. You must always preserve a sense of proportion in these matters. It lasted for three months. By the end of that time AKEL had made no move. But they had succeeded."

Judge Vereker paused, and added, "Poor fellow. He went mad. I saw him the other day. He's a little better now, but he'll never be much use. The slightest unexpected sound or movement makes him scream." That, thought Petrella grimly, was a type of assault that was very unlikely to succeed in this case.

He guessed that at that moment Judge Vereker was sleeping soundly. A lot more soundly than the anxious policemen who were trying to guard him, or, for that matter, than the men who were working to destroy him.

Funny—what was that?

A faint scintillating light had appeared over the trees and bushes in the strip of park that ran along the closed end of the road. If it had been the fifth of November he would have written it down as a cheap firework. It rose, dipped, and went out. Nothing else happened.

One o'clock. A dog barked. Then another. He heard footsteps coming along the next street. Two pairs of feet. They stopped at the corner and then the voices started. Too low to determine sex. Much too low to hear what was being said. One was insisting, Petrella thought, the other protesting.

The voices stopped abruptly

and the footsteps came on. Peering through the open front door, Petrella saw them. A man and a girl by their silhouettes. They reached the porch two doors away, and the footsteps stopped and the voices started again, louder this time.

They were just outside the range of his comprehension, but the cadences were clear enough. The man insisting, repeating. The girl saying no. No. No.

Suddenly they broke off. There was a muffled scuffling noise. A cry. Then the man slipped out of the porch, turned his head for a quick look up and down the road, and took to his heels.

Behind him, from the porch, came a little sobbing moan, and the girl staggered after him. Took two paces, stumbled, and went down on her knees in the middle of the road. Clutched her stomach, and pitched forward and sideways onto her face.

"He's done her," said Petrella. His hands were on the door. He jerked it open, and his foot was actually lifted to go through, when reason took charge of instinct.

Anyone watching Petrella at that moment would have seen something as shocking as a car that is rolling forward being thrown suddenly into reverse. For a count of seconds he stood

quite still. The girl lay motionless in the road, the lamp casting a pool of light round her. Then Petrella moved, like one released from a spell.

Very slowly his hand unfolded and he let the door swing shut. Very slowly and very softly he walked back into the porter's cubicle, picked up the telephone, and dialed a number.

"Police," he said. "It's Detective Sergeant Petrella. On duty at Heath Hill Mansions. There's been some trouble. Out in the street. A girl's been hurt."

The other end of the telephone said something.

"Yes," said Petrella. "I thought so too. Perhaps if you closed both ends of the street. Just in case." He replaced the receiver and, almost on tiptoe, walked back to the street door.

As he stood there, for the second time that night, a faint glimmering light arose over the line of bushes at the end of the road, hung for a moment, and disappeared.

In the succeeding blackness and stillness he heard a sound, small but distinct.

It came from behind him. From the courtyard at the back.

He ran across the hallway and jerked at the back door. It refused to budge. He put his shoulder to it, but realized that

he was wasting his time. The door was built to open inward.

Quickly. Think quickly. He pressed the doorbell of the ground-floor flat. Almost at once the door was opened. The South African dentist was wearing a dressing gown. He seemed surprisingly wide-awake.

"Trouble?" he said.

"I don't know," said Petrella. "Would you stand here a minute? Shout if anything happens. There'll be a squad car along any moment."

"Sure," said the dentist.

Petrella ran past him into the kitchen and snapped on the light. The back door of this flat also opened on the court. It was bolted, but when he had slipped the bolt the door swung open.

The light from the kitchen window lit up the little enclosed space. It was quite empty. Petrella had had visions of a ladder spanning the missing section of the fire escape, but there was nothing at all. And all the upper windows were dark.

He went out cautiously. A wire, he discovered, had been passed through the handle of the door that led into the hall and secured to a window bar opposite. And the back gate into the street behind swung open to his touch.

Petrella walked thoughtfully

back into the kitchen, bolting the door carefully behind him. He found the stout dentist on guard.

"Here come your chaps," he said.

It was Superintendent Haxtell, who must have been sleeping in his clothes. "Where's the girl friend?"

Petrella peered out into the street, lit now by the powerful spotlight of the police car. It was empty.

"We had both ends of the street blocked within three minutes of your phone call," said Haxtell. "She moved pretty quick for a dead girl."

"It was a put-up job, all right," said Petrella.

He told the Superintendent what had happened and they went back into the courtyard.

"We'd better move the wire," said Haxtell. "We'll leave the rest as it is. The boys may get something out of it in the morning."

They thanked the dentist, who observed that it had been quite an evening.

"What do you think it was all about?" said Haxtell as they stood together in the hall.

"Plainly," said Petrella, "they expected me to run out and help the girl. I don't know what was next on the bill. Possibly they planned to cosh me as I was bending over her. They had

the back door ready wired, so something quite elaborate was planned to happen in the yard. Maybe a ladder up to the start of the fire escape. And they'd have had a shot at breaking in through the Judge's kitchen. It wouldn't be easy. The back door's locked and bolted and the windows are barred and wired."

"Maybe," said Haxtell. "What about the fireworks?"

"Some sort of signal?"

"Signal of what?"

Petrella considered the matter. "Suppose," he said, "that they had the telephone from the flat tapped. Somewhere down the road. The first signal would be to start operations. The second would mean, 'Break it off. He hasn't fallen for it and he's telephoned for reinforcements. Get out quick.'"

"Could be," said Haxtell. He was still worried. What he really wanted to do was to go up and see if the Judge was all right. But he realized that it might be difficult to wake up a sleeping man simply to explain that something was going on which he couldn't understand himself.

In the end he said, "All right. Keep your eyes open," and drove away.

Petrella was troubled, too, but about something else. He was trying to place the noise that he had heard in the dark-

ness after the second light signal. At first he had thought that it was the back gate of the courtyard. He even went out and tried opening and shutting it, but he couldn't induce it to make the right sort of noise—a rackety click.

He was still worrying about it as the sky paled and the light came back and a new day hauled itself sluggishly over the horizon.

At seven o'clock the milkman arrived. He had, besides the milk, a box of fresh eggs, butter, and two loaves of bread for the Judge. Petrella knew him well by now. Nevertheless he went through the careful routine of search, even unwrapping and piercing each loaf with a steel needle.

"Wooden' like to search the eggs as well?" suggested the milkman, who was a cheerful young cockney.

"That's enough of that," said Petrella. "You can send 'em up."

The Judge, who was an early riser, used to take the stuff in himself and cook his own breakfast. His daily woman wasn't due till nine. Petrella was just reflecting, with pleasure, that by nine o'clock he would be safely in bed himself, when he heard the noise again.

Unmistakably, the same rackety click.

He jumped to the back door and jerked it open. Outside the courtyard was empty. The milkman had gone. Nothing moved. It came again, above his head this time. Then he saw the wheel rotating and the wire running. It was the small service lift going slowly upward.

Time stood still.

Then Petrella was in the passenger elevator, the sweat pouring off him in a steady stream. First floor, second floor. And he was pelting down the passage. He placed a finger on the bell and kept it there.

After an eternity the door opened and Judge Vereker looked out.

"Why, Sergeant—"

"Have you lifted them out?" croaked Petrella.

"Lifted what?"

"I'm sorry." Petrella recovered his breath and his heart stopped pounding. "The stuff that was coming up in your service lift?"

"As a matter of fact, I'd just opened it when you rang."

"But you hadn't touched anything?"

"No. It looked all right to me, though."

"The stuff's all right," said Petrella. "I examined it myself. It's the lift itself. They tampered with it last night."

As he spoke they were walking into the tiny spotless

kitchen. The doors of the service lift stood open, and the cardboard box of groceries lay where the milkman had placed it.

Petrella said, "Have you got a torch?"

The Judge hobbled off to his bedroom. When he came back with the torch Petrella said, "It's right, isn't it, that no one else can use this lift while your doors are open?"

"Quite right," said the Judge. "That tiresome woman in the flat underneath once went away for the weekend and left hers open. What's the catch?"

Petrella was on one knee, shining the light through the gap between the bottom of the lift box and the top of the boarding.

"There's something there," he said. "I'm going to get help on this. If we leave the doors open and the lift where it is, it can't hurt us."

He went into the Judge's sitting room and dialed a number which is not in the telephone book. A bored voice said, "Heath Hill Mansions. Number 27 . . . All right. We'll send a car round straight away."

Five minutes later a man in a raincoat, carrying a heavy bag of tools and looking like a superior plumber, had arrived and introduced himself as Sergeant Oliphant.

"Is it safe to watch?" said the Judge. "Or do you want us to clear out?"

"Safe enough now you've spotted it," said Oliphant. "Neat, though. Very neat." He got a long steel rod with a tiny light bulb at the end of it out of his bag and inserted it under the lift.

"Care to look?" he said.

Petrella saw that three solid-looking blocks of some dark toffeelike substance had been clamped to the underside of the box. Oliphant took a thin pair of pliers, slid them in, and snipped twice.

"Clever, really," he said.

He lifted off the box of groceries, and as he did so the whole floor of the lift rose for a fraction of an inch, then checked.

"They've slipped in a double floor. See? The sort of thing you get in a passenger lift. Spring-loaded. The weight of those groceries would be quite enough to keep it down. That makes an electrical contact. When you lift the box off, you'd touch off the stuff underneath. About six pounds of gelignite, I should say. Do you no good at all. By the way, how did they know your man would be the first to use it?"

"He had a special early delivery," said Petrella. "Every morning."

"Great mistake," said Oliphant, "if you don't mind me saying so. Never do things the same every day. Not with these types. It's playing into their hands. I'll get up the steamer from the car and disinfect this lot."

Petrella stood for a moment, listening to Oliphant's footsteps disappearing down the passage. He felt both breathless and deflated. Then he was aware that the Judge was speaking. "I notice," he said, "that our friend has left his tool bag behind. We'd better get moving."

Petrella stared.

The Judge gripped his arm. "There's really no time to waste," he said urgently. "Come on!" The next minute they, too, were out in the passage, and running.

"Down the stairs," said the Judge. "This'll do. You won't catch him now."

Together they flopped down on the stairs. Two floors below them a door slammed and they heard a car start. Then all sounds were blotted out in the solid roar from the flat they had just left.

Petrella raised his nose from the stair carpet. His ears were singing. Fragments of plaster were still dropping from the ceiling and the air was full of dancing dust.

"How did you know that that man was a fake?" said Petrella.

"It was Antar," said the Judge. "I recognized him as soon as he came in. He's very like his brother."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"He had a gun. Neither of us had. It seemed safer to let him think he'd got away with it."

"The tool bag was full of explosives."

"With a very short time fuse, yes."

"How did he know—" Petrella started. And then stopped. He was asking himself questions to which he knew the answer. "Of course. They had the telephone line tapped. It was a double precaution, in case we spotted the lift."

"They're very persistent people," said the Judge. "I expect they'll get me in the end. You'd better go and comfort our lady journalist. By the sound of it she's having hysterics."

"Q"

a **NEW** detective-crime story by
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MISS FERGUSON VERSUS JM

by **GERALD TOMLINSON**

Elsie Ferguson, a spinster with gold-rimmed granny glasses, had been a library clerk in Elm City for 43 years. She knew the Dewey Decimal System down to the fourth digit after the period. She knew the card catalogue from A, *A Novel to Zylstra, Henry*.

Despite her expertise neither library books nor catalogue numbers were her true forte. Names and faces were. She had a photographic memory for people.

Whenever a person brought books to the circulation desk at the Elm City Library, Miss Ferguson would close her eyes

for a moment, match the face with a name in her files, smile over the top of the gray book-charging machine, and say, "It's nice to see you again, Mr. —, Mrs. —, or Miss —" and fill in the name.

But if the borrowers' names and faces were a challenge to Miss Ferguson, their reading habits bored her to blasphemy. The average reader carried away books that to Miss Ferguson seemed as dull as baseball and as mindless as bowling: mysteries, historical romances, Gothic novels, celebrity biographies, science fiction.

There was one exception.

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Miss Ferguson loved books on coin collecting. She had spent most of her life and most of her small income in building a collection of United States coins. It was a tiny collection compared with the great ones—the Smithsonian's or the American Numismatic Society's—but it was strong on early American Large Cents.

Miss Ferguson did not belong to the Tionega Valley Coin Club, and she avoided coin shows. She seldom exhibited her collection, but instead kept much of it stored in a vault of the First Tionega Canal Bank.

The quality of her collection was well known, however, and she had recently lent three of her rarest Large Cents, two 1793's and an 1804, to the Calvert Coin Museum in Baltimore.

Miss Ferguson was both a collector and a student of numismatics. On early American Large Cents she was one of the three or four living experts. She had written articles on the subject for *The Numismatist*, one of which had been published as a book and stood, to her satisfaction, in section 737.4 of the Elm City Library.

Once every couple of years she and her hobby were the subject of a feature column and a photograph or two in the local newspaper.

Coins fascinated her. So did books on coins. But she did not mix business with pleasure. At the library she watched people come and go, fed cards into the book-charging machine, and thought little about either coins or books.

Yet this people-watching was less a sociable exercise than an intellectual one, as Miss Ferguson knew. She said hello to more people in a day than most people did in a month, but still she was a loner, a dedicated loner. She had no close friends, no social life, and had never tried to have any. She cherished privacy. She had been followed by neither suitors nor trouble, and not for one moment in her 65 years had she thought seriously about marriage.

The names-and-faces ritual was simply a game she had made up to lighten the long leaden hours at the library. It was a form of escape. She did not consider it an especially praiseworthy pastime. She always tried to be honest with herself about her motives, not to lie to herself the way some people did.

The memory game had begun, she remembered, 40 years before when she learned that the then Postmaster General, James Farley, could pair off 50,000 names with 50,000

faces. She was impressed. She knew almost no borrowers by name in those early days. Now, four decades later, she figured her repertoire at 10,000 names and faces.

Although no one interested her very much personally, some people interested her more than others. There was one great hulk of a man in particular: Mr. Joseph Moldavi, a tall swarthy gentleman, black-bearded like Ivan the Terrible, a man whose choice of books caused Miss Ferguson to look twice at the borrower, and to wonder.

He was a strikingly handsome man, this Mr. Moldavi, a point that Miss Ferguson noted at first with more disdain than delight. Looks, like books, were suspect. Anyway, the small black mole on his left cheek marred his appearance; it looked to her like an ugly embedded insect. But it did give her a mnemonic hook on which to hang the name Moldavi: mole-Moldavi.

After a while, given her gift for observation, she could not help noticing how his reading habits matched—and matched alarmingly—what had been happening in Elm City.

Side by side with the usual street construction, school-budget defeats, and political corruption, Elm City was hav-

ing a series of big-money burglaries. In the past two years there had been five spectacular thefts—an Elm City crime wave that coincided exactly, Miss Ferguson noted, with Mr. Moldavi's career as a borrower at the library.

First there had been three jewelry-store burglaries, clever nighttime heists with no clues and no suspects. The jewels were on the premises one day and gone the next. These events had followed hard on the heels of Mr. Moldavi's three-month concentration on books about gems and minerals.

Next there had been two art thefts. The Blaiberg Art Gallery had lost two Ben Shahn's in one night, the only two valuable paintings in the Blaiberg collection. Less than six months later Langdon College found itself missing a Schneider Esch portrait of Mark Twain valued at \$20,000. These two thefts had coincided with Mr. Moldavi's persistent enchantment with books on art.

Each of these five thefts had required expert knowledge, according to the Elm City Chief of Police, Thomas McEachern, a morose man with a gray crew-cut and five nagging reasons to be morose. Only the best items in each place had been taken. And all the thefts had been executed, he said, by the same

thoroughgoing professionals, men or women who knew jewels, art, locks, alarm systems, and enough else to stay out of suspicion and prison.

Miss Ferguson did not see herself as a detective. But there it was: Mr. Moldavi, the self-taught expert, the suave bookish thief. Black beard, black mole, black money. He had stopped borrowing books on art after the Esch robbery, and for the past two months he had been charging out armloads of books about wine.

This new interest puzzled Miss Ferguson. Jewels were understandable. So were paintings. But wine?

No one enjoyed a glass of white table wine more than Miss Ferguson. But her Sunday evening sauternes or riesling cost only \$2 or \$3 a bottle, not much more than the bottled spring water she drank on weekdays. She had never supposed that sauternes could be in a class with sapphires and Shahns.

Miss Ferguson, her suspicions aroused, decided to test her theory, to research the wine market on her lunch hour. The best place to investigate, she knew, was Parrish's Wine Cellar, a downtown landmark for three generations, a small shop on Charles Street with wide plank flooring and the smell of

cheese. Even a teetotaler with a taste for TV dinners knew that Parrish's was the finest store in Elm City for wine, liquor, and cheese.

She drove to Parrish's in her rusted-out mauve Dodge, arriving a little after noon. She dropped a nickel in the meter out front, paused under the zebra-striped awning, and considered her strategy.

Inside the store Miss Ferguson addressed herself to a ruddy face behind a white goatee. "It's nice to see you again, Mr. Parrish," she said. She recognized him because he occasionally took out books on woodworking or some equally dreary subject. "I'd like to see your most expensive bottle of wine."

Alex Parrish smiled across the counter at her—a bit patronizingly, she thought. Probably he recognized her as a novice at wines. But he nodded and said, "Certainly. You realize, of course, that in order to see that particular bottle, we will have to go down into the cellar."

She looked at him steadily over her bifocals, not quite sure what he meant.

"Well," he explained, "I really can't afford to disturb a fine old Bordeaux unless you wish to purchase it." She looked innocent, questioning. "You

usually buy a domestic riesling, don't you, Miss—?"

"Ferguson." She felt herself blushing. "Yes, I do." She was surprised that he remembered her. "But if it's not asking too much, Mr. Parrish, I would like to see your most expensive bottle today. A gift—"

"Of course, Miss Ferguson. Please step this way."

She was astonished at the extent of the Parrish wine cellar. A dozen ceiling-high racks stretched the length of a long room, and the racks were filled with thousands upon thousands of bottles.

Mr. Parrish led Miss Ferguson to the far side of the cellar where, under a hanging fluorescent fixture, he pointed toward a bottle with a slight covering of dust. "There it is." Then, observing her disappointed expression, he shrugged his narrow shoulders and slowly, carefully drew out the bottle, using both hands, and tilted it ever so slightly to show her the label.

She could not read French and did not know the cryptography of wine labels, but she could see *Chateau Lafite-Rothschild* and 1945.

He smiled at her. "Eight hundred dollars," he said simply, but in a reverent tone of voice.

Miss Ferguson gulped. She

cleared her throat. "That's a bit more than I expected. Do you have any bottles for—well, maybe fifty dollars?"

The proprietor of the Wine Cellar chuckled as if he might have anticipated this sudden shattering of the dream. "Certainly, Miss Ferguson. Dozens, perhaps hundreds. In fact, many of them are Lafites such as this one. But not"—he paused and raised his eyes—"not the legendary '45."

"My goodness."

"Would you care to see a less expensive year from that Chateau? Or perhaps a Latour or a Margaux?"

"Thank you, Mr. Parrish, I do appreciate your courtesy. But perhaps I'd better think about it some more. May I come back another day?"

"By all means."

He returned the bottle to its resting place, and Miss Ferguson, in a state of mild shock, drove back to the Elm City Library.

That afternoon Mr. Moldavi returned five books on wine, pushing them firmly across the polished oak counter. Yes, indeed, he was a fine figure of a man. He strode down the dark tunnel into the stacks with that disturbing *macho* manner of his, a stride that both enchanted and annoyed her. He returned a few minutes later

with four new books about wine.

Miss Ferguson met him at the book-charging machine, closed her eyes for an instant so as not to change her mnemonic routine—heavens, she knew *him* all right—then smiled nervously and said, "It's nice to see you again, Mr. Moldavi." She had been rehearsing a question to ask him about Chateau Lafite. Did she dare? "May I ask—?"

"Yes?" Mr. Moldavi smiled, displaying a costly set of capped teeth. "What can I do for you?" His voice was warm and ingratiating, an actor's or a prophet's voice. He made it sound as if he had been eagerly waiting for the moment he might be allowed to talk to her.

Miss Ferguson's heart jumped. This was a bit too heady. "Nothing." She bit her lip, steadied her shaking hand, and hurriedly punched the date cards. Mr. Moldavi watched her through cobalt-blue eyes.

As soon as he had left, she chided herself for her silly show of emotion. After a few minutes she crossed to a file of membership applications and took out Joseph Moldavi's card. According to the information on it he lived at 23 Strathmore Drive, West Elm City. His telephone number was 382-5968. His employer was Consolidated Pre-

fabricated Homes, where he was a supervisor.

His reference—a line on the card required of all applicants but seldom checked—was Harvey Galton of 19 River Knolls, Northwood. Telephone 602-1948.

Miss Ferguson hastened to the telephone and dialed 602-1948. Mr. Galton. Her breath came in short puffs as she waited. Investigative work was stimulating, but it was not really in her line. A woman's voice answered. "Yeah?"

"Hello. Mrs. Galton?"

"Right on, dearie." The voice was fuzzy. "Except now I'm remarried. The name is Bowman."

"Oh, I see." Miss Ferguson frowned. "I'm calling from the Elm City Library, Mrs. Bowman. My name is Elsie Ferguson. We have received an application for a library card from a Mr. Joseph Moldavi. I would like to verify your husband's—that is, your ex-husband's—acquaintance with him."

"Hold on. Moldy-who? What are you talking about, hon?"

"Joseph Moldavi. Did your husband know him?"

There was a muffled curse on the other end of the line, aimed at either a pet or a child underfoot, followed by a noisy swallow. "Harvey Galton knew zip.

Now he knows angleworms. He's dead."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"I'm not. He was a loser from the word go. You know any losers?"

Miss Ferguson stared into the black holes of the mouthpiece. "I beg your pardon?"

"Don't beg, dearie. Never beg." A long pause; then Mrs. Bowman said, "Marvelous Harv, as I used to call him, was killed in a bank holdup in Albany two years ago."

"Oh, how terrible."

"Yeah, terrible. You said it, terrible. He had a satchel full of cash that never got past the State Street curb."

Miss Ferguson gasped. "He was holding up the bank?"

A high laugh rattled across the wire. "You're too much, hon! Where're you from anyway, the Little Sisters of Mercy, Seven Miles Outside the City of Jerusalem?"

"No. I mean—" Miss Ferguson stopped to think, trying to put her meager facts in order. Then she gambled for the second or possibly the third time in her life. "Mrs. Bowman, could you tell me if one of the other men in the bank holdup was a Mr. Moldavi? Joseph Moldavi?"

"Who's this guy Moldy you keep bringing up? I never heard of him. Wait a minute."

Miss Ferguson heard the clink of ice against glass in the background. A moment later Mrs. Bowman's voice returned. "There was no Moldy in the gang, dearie. How about Larry Kincaid? Would he do? He got shot along with Harv. Died a couple of days later at Albany Hospital."

"I'm afraid not. Moldavi is the name."

"Well, call 'em like you see 'em, hon. I'll tell you what I know. There was one other guy on the bank job. Brad Eaton, who's now in Dannemora. Oh, yeah, there was also the lame-brain who planned it. Joe Masseno, the so-called genius of the operation. You get that? Joe the Genius." She snorted. "Some genius. But he backed out before they went to Albany—said the plan still needed work. It sure did. Huh, I guess maybe Masseno *did* have more brains than the rest of them."

"Joe Masseno? He was the one who planned it?"

"You deaf?"

"I'm sorry. And you say he backed out before they went to Albany?"

"Deaf as a fence post."

"Mrs. Bowman, could you tell me what Joe Masseno looked like?"

"Never saw him, hon. Never saw anybody except Harv. Only

saw *him* about twice a month. Just heard him talk about the rest of the meatheads. Joe the Genius. *He* knew the score, Harv used to say. Yeah, he knew the score all right. The score was cops three, crooks nothing." She hiccupped.

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Bowman."

"Don't mention it, hon. A day's work for a day's pay, I always say. What do you always say?"

Miss Ferguson said nothing.

"Well, cheers then?"

"Yes."

"Roger and out!"

With a scowl Miss Ferguson lowered the receiver to its cradle. She immediately dialed 382-5968, the Moldavi number. She knew pretty much what to expect. When the answering voice droned, "The number you have dialed is not in service—" she smiled and hung up.

Joe Masseno. Initials: JM. She leafed idly through the M's in the Elm City phone book, not expecting a miracle. People with aliases were slippery and hard to find, she supposed, this being her first experience with aliases. There was no Joe Masseno listed in the directory.

But there was a Joseph Malloy, and suddenly Miss Ferguson's mnemonic system clicked into gear. JM. Somehow, for some reason, the name

Joseph Malloy meant something. For the first time in 40 years her names-and-faces repertoire came up against a genuine, practical problem. She leaned back in her chair, excited by the sudden associations, and thought hard, concentrated, racked her memory, conjuring up mental images, grasping at mnemonic hooks.

Mallow, marshmallow, white skin, toasted marshmallow, brown, brown, not a name, brown marks, scars, the double l's, parallel scars on one cheek. Malloy, Malloy, that was it. Joseph Malloy. She knew him. She squinted to clear up the haze of time. Thirty, thirty-five years ago, he had borrowed books at least a dozen times. The young Joseph Malloy, a high school kid, basketball injury to his face, bad teeth, tall—that was him.

Joseph Malloy was Joseph Moldavi as a young man. Thirty or more years ago. No question about it. Why hadn't she seen it before? And Joseph Malloy—she supposed that must be his real name—now lived at 278 Foster Avenue, Elm City. She whistled.

She ignored the phone number. The name and address were enough. They were like Large Cents from heaven, precious and hers alone. She had to see Joseph Malloy in person.

That evening after work Miss Ferguson began a new day-by-day routine. From the Elm City Library she swung her rusted-out Dodge north on Wycherly Boulevard for two miles, then east on Foster Avenue, a modest residential street. She drove slowly past 278, a white Cape Cod with dark blue shutters, a tidy and cheerful house. She peered and blinked, like a sparrow hawk hunting an insect.

For about a month she saw nothing. Just a quiet house and sometimes a nondescript car. Then, unexpectedly, on a dark muggy Thursday, with her Dodge clattering and the heat indicator touching red, she saw him—Joseph Malloy, Joseph Moldavi, one and the same—and Joseph Masseno, too, she assumed—mowing the lawn, sweating in a T-shirt, muscles bulging, tall body leaning into the curved handle of his power mower, glaring at her Dodge, unaware of the fate closing in on him like gray storm clouds over the Tionega River.

Miss Ferguson now knew all she needed to know. But what was she to do with it? Inform the police?

She considered the possibility. Mr. Moldavi-Malloy-Masseno would be arrested and convicted, she was sure of it. He would be sentenced to a long prison term.

And if Miss Ferguson gave the police an anonymous telephone tip, got him arrested that way, which seemed the safest course, there would be no chance of the trapped man blaming his arrest on her and perhaps later taking revenge.

But there were two problems. One: Miss Ferguson did not believe in prisons. She hated the idea of locking up human beings like cattle. She thought prisons were pestholes, breeding grounds for more crime, teeming swamps of brutality and nameless perversions.

The second problem was more personal. She had come to admire Joseph Moldavi and had finally come to realize it. Exactly why, she didn't know, but she admired him a great deal. He was a suave gentleman, handsome, yes, handsome despite the mole, a wide reader, a man of action, a scholar of sorts, surely not a common thug.

The police—oh, dear, she knew the police by reputation. They would not treat their captive like a gentleman and a scholar. They would treat him like a criminal, like a found victim. Chief of Police McEachern obviously hated Mr. Moldavi already, without even knowing him, to judge by the Chief's comments to reporters.

No, Mr. Moldavi could not

expect justice in Elm City. He would be demeaned, manhandled, confined, his talents scorned, and then he would be shunted off to prison, perhaps for the rest of his life. Miss Ferguson could meet him again, if at all, only behind bars, or at the morgue, or at the funeral.

No. It must not happen that way.

The next night, in the solitude of her small apartment, with the air conditioner whirling and the bright faces of a Norman Rockwell print beaming down on her, she sat at her Underwood portable and typed out a message on plain, untraceable 3x5 notepaper.

Dear Mr. Malloy,

Do not try to rob Parrish's Wine Cellar. The police have been informed of your plans. Mr. Parrish has been given your description and is armed. You are in grave danger in Elm City. You must move away. Please, for your own safety, leave town.

An Admirer

She typed his name and address on the blank white envelope, pasted a stamp on it upside down, and made a special trip to the post office to mail it.

Three nights later, when she had worked up the nerve to

drive past his house, she found it vacant, tidy but cheerless, a For Rent sign on the lawn.

Mr. Malloy-Moldavi-Masseno had left town, or gone underground. Parrish's Wine Cellar would not be burglarized. Miss Ferguson had succeeded where the Elm City police had failed.

She felt no sense of triumph. A tear trickled down her cheek. If she had been a more emotional woman, she would have drowned her sorrow in a pool of tears, then or later, for that was how she felt about her recent acts and their consequences.

An end to snooping, she vowed. For weeks afterward she concentrated on her coin collection, thankful more than ever for it. At the bank and in her apartment she studied the many faces of the ageless and aloof Miss Liberty, the unsleeping beauty of numismatics, whose copper profile glowed in low relief and whose eyes stared unblinking, unseeing, toward the edge of her tiny universe. Almost as penance she lent another of her precious possessions, a mint 1799 Large Cent, to the Calvert Coin Museum in Baltimore.

Mr. Moldavi was gone. Out of Elm City and out of her life. Forever, she supposed.

For three years.

It was late August when he

reappeared, and at first Miss Ferguson did not recognize him. The mole was gone. The beard was gone. He had lost weight. His hair was longer and lighter in color. He wore a pencil-thin mustache, as if trying to impersonate the devil or Vincent Price.

He was carrying a black overnight bag.

As he entered the library, he glanced sharply around, alert but calm. He fixed his attention on the circulation desk and walked toward Miss Ferguson.

At the desk he leaned down, placed his black bag on the floor, and unzipped it with a flourish. He removed a green corked bottle, which he set on the oak counter in front of her.

Her heart jumped to her throat, and she stammered, "Hello. It's nice to see you again, Mr.—"

"Mohrmann," he said, flashing his ivory grin. "It's nice to see *you* again, Miss Ferguson. I brought you a little present—a bottle of wine from an excellent shop on Charles Street. Chateau Margaux '47. I hope you enjoy it."

"But—"

He leaned an elbow on the desk. Miss Ferguson backed away, a chill icing her spine. He continued to smile. "How did I learn your identity? Is that what you're wondering?"

He ran a forefinger along his mustache. "It's elementary, my dear. I have a memory for cars—for makes and models and colors and years and dents and licenses. The same kind of memory you must have for names and faces. It's useful in my line of work."

Miss Ferguson had an intense urge to run away, to get to a phone, to call the police. Mr. Moldavi was no longer an object of her concern, he was an instant enemy. She wanted to move but couldn't. Her heart pierced by betrayal, she stood motionless.

"Now, you, Miss Ferguson, you drive an eleven-year-old Dodge Charger, unless you've gotten rid of it. It's reddish violet, rusted out, with a broken left taillight—which is probably fixed by now—and license number 398-KLV." He spread his arms wide, palms up, as if to make light of his talent. Joe the Genius.

She spoke haltingly, her thin voice trilling like a schoolgirl's in spite of her efforts to control it. "But why me, Mr.—? Why are you bothering with me?"

He pretended patience. "My dear lady, when a car goes creeping past my house night after night for two or three weeks, I pay attention to it. I find out who's driving it, and why. Your license number told

me who—I have sources for that kind of information—and your charming note told me why.”

She felt frightened and ridiculous at the same time. She summoned up her courage. She wanted him gone. “You were foolish to come back, Mr.—The police—”

Mr. Malloy-Moldavi-Masseno-Mohrmann smiled at her with no trace of humor. “I’m just passing through. I can work in whatever city I choose. I’m here for a goodbye look at my secret admirer, nothing more. The museum yesterday was my fourth and last target in Baltimore. I’m moving west.”

Miss Ferguson said nothing.

She felt a sinking sensation deep within her, touching her soul.

“Yes, I’ve come from there this morning,” he said in an even voice, following her thoughts. His cobalt-blue eyes, the handsome eyes of doom, stared straight into hers. There was no liking in them, only mockery. “Since I won’t be going back, Miss Ferguson, could you please mail these books to the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore for me? I wouldn’t want them to be overdue.”

He reached into his overnight bag again, and handed her, one by one, five books on coin collecting.

“Q”

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

They say lightning never strikes twice in the same place. Not true—at least, not true for literary lightning striking EQMM. Once again a new writer, previously unpublished, has sent two stories to EQMM—his first two stories, his two first stories—and once again we cannot resist the temptation to give a new writer a double debut in print. Here, then, are the 422nd and 423rd first stories to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, appearing back to back—and as different a pair of tales by the same author as ever appeared simultaneously in these pages . . .

The author, Thomas Otter (a pseudonym), is in his forties and has been a teacher of Greek and Latin most of his adult life. He has written some book reviews for the "Washington Post" and some essays on contemporary topics. His two stories in this issue represent his first published fiction . . .

ASSASSINATION

by THOMAS OTTER

Armand Fignac, the mayor's chauffeur, shifted smoothly into first gear and turned into the Avenue de la République. Gawkers along the route this morning were not even numerous enough to line the curb. Most passers-by gave the big open car with its motorcycle escort a brief glance, then hurried on about their business. This was not a parade, merely a state visit.

Some folks, though, were al-

ways glad to stand and stare at anything the least bit out of the ordinary. His wife Violette was like that, Armand thought with affectionate amusement. The very first time he had laid eyes on her, she had been standing in front of her mother's pâtisserie, staring wide-eyed at nothing more remarkable than a horse-drawn ragpicker's cart across the street.

And how wide those eyes of hers were! How deep! A man

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could swim in them. He could, that is, so long as she let him. Armand sighed. More and more these days he seemed to read a "No Trespassing" sign not only in her eyes but in her inflections and gestures, in the whole carriage of her body.

By now the spectators along the curb were even fewer. The open car had passed through the center of the city and was now nearing the waterfront. Armand stepped on the accelerator a trifle harder. The mayor wouldn't mind; he took no pleasure in appearing in public with his bitterest political enemy.

The two men on the rear seat sat with as much space between them as the huge black car would allow. They looked like two spiteful little boys who had been forced by their teacher—for the time being—to "make up." They had something more important than women on their minds: politics.

The mayor was the rising star of the Left. As mayor of a great maritime city, he drew the hard core of his support, people said, from among the extremists on the docks. It was even money that the next election would see him succeed to the office and dignities of the man who was sitting, with his mouth drawn in an even thinner line of distaste than usual,

on the opposite side of the car.

The Premier—he sat on the right, appropriately enough—was not pleased by the company he was keeping. The situation had been forced on him. In the present state of Europe (which was reeling through the turbulent decade that preceded the Second World War), even minor royalty had to be cosseted. And if this Balkan princeling insisted on arriving in his yacht, there was no help for it. A busy man had to drop the reins of government, endure the journey south, and—worst of all—associate with *canaille*, all in order to greet the fellow with proper ceremony and escort him onto the soil of the Republic. It was really too bad!

At the moment Armand began to pick up speed, a man named Michel was standing flat against the wall of a shabby second-floor office, peering obliquely through an open window down onto the Avenue de la République. From where he stood he could see the avenue emerging from under the iron railroad bridge that crossed it only a block north of the quay. This was a district of warehouses and rundown office buildings.

A lean knifelike man in his early thirties, taut as a piano wire, Michel seemed forged by nature to cleave through obsta-

cles and reach his goal, whatever that might be. His vivid, almost black eyes glowed with the inner fire of some consuming purpose. He was that most dangerous of animals, an able man with a fixed idea. In his right hand he cradled, almost tenderly, the heavy steel cylinder of a concussion grenade.

Careful scouting had assured him that the building he had selected would be deserted all through the weekend. There would be few, if any, innocent bystanders in this part of town on a Saturday morning. The back door of the building had yielded to an ordinary skeleton key and led directly out into a maze of alleys and dingy squares, which would take him quickly away from the scene of carnage and confusion that was about to take place. It seemed almost too easy.

And childishly easy it proved to be. Protective security in those days was not as thorough as bitter experience has made it today. The open window went unnoticed; even in motion the big car offered an easy target; the only witness who happened to look up and see the grenade arching out over the cobblestones and the dark tense face turning away from the window was the mayor. His capacity for making identification was destined to be very short-lived.

The grenade exploded with a heavy muffled roar and left the car and its occupants a twisted mass of bloody wreckage. Of the four gendarmes in the motorcycle escort three were wounded. The lucky one was too stunned at first to take any steps beyond the obvious one of phoning for reinforcements. By the time he had the wit to check the alley behind the building with the now conspicuous open window, Michel was boarding a trolley four blocks away, all set to jolt and jangle straight out of the massive manhunt that was about to get under way.

There was no description; the only man who had seen the assassin, the mayor, was dead. The exasperating question for the police was: who was the intended victim? The mayor or the Premier? Were they to look for a crackpot of the Left or of the Right?

Political experts were brought in from Paris. Inspector Labiche was an expert on the Left; Inspector Girval was an expert on the Right. They consulted their files; they threw out dragnets; they hauled in suspects; they detained and they interrogated; they met informers in shabby bistros and on benches in public parks; they consulted their files again; they threw up their hands.

Inspector Labiche was morally certain that the outlawed ultraradical League for Social Justice was responsible for the outrage. Its leader, Pépé the Rock, was known to be a man of violent opinions. Unfortunately, Pépé the Rock was now in prison in Toulon.

Inspector Girval was morally certain that the archreactionary Association for the Preservation of Ancient Values was responsible for the outrage. Its leader, M. Saincoeur, was known to be a man of violent opinions. Unfortunately, M. Saincoeur was 76 years old and crippled by arthritis.

The investigation ground on noisily, like an engine that someone has neglected to oil. Two governments fell in less than four months. The first, a Rightist régime, was accused by the newspapers of shielding a Rightist assassin. The second, a Leftist régime, was accused by the same newspapers of shielding a Leftist assassin.

The Centrist régime that followed tried to lay the blame on Spanish anarchists. Diplomatic notes were exchanged. Ambassadors were recalled.

At the very moment the third (Centrist) régime was being toppled in the Chamber of Deputies, Michel, the man with an idea, was lying on the beach near St. Tropez, soaking in the Mediterranean sun. His dark eyes still smoldered, but in an almost contented way, like banked fires.

By his side lay Violette, the widow of Armand Fignac. Armand's insurance as a municipal employee, together with a discreet but substantial private policy, promised to keep the two of them in unassuming luxury for several years.

Violette's eyes were closed against the noonday glare. For a few minutes Michel gazed in silence at her slender sun-bronzed body. She was worth every risk he had taken. She was a consuming purpose for a man, a grand idea.

"Violette," he said at last, "there's a spot I can't reach on my shoulder. Be a pussycat and rub some oil on it for me."

"Left or right?" she murmured languorously.

He smiled. "Chérie," he said, "you know that politics have never meant a thing to me."

"Q"

THE STAFF OF ELISHA

by THOMAS OTTER

*Being an Excerpt Translated from the
Chronicle of the Abbey of Newburn St. Mark's*

In the year 1217 it was vouchsafed us to witness a signal instance of the divine power at work in the Abbot Samson. Through him the Lord searched to the bottom of the most foul murder that has ever stained His consecrated house and handed over the fiend who committed it to the justice of this world.

I know not how it is, but even among men sincerely devoted to God's service, strife and dissension will arise. How much more is this true when carnal men are forced willy-nilly to dwell among us! The lay lords do us great hurt by using our sacred precincts as refuges for the guilty and as places of exile for those who trouble them. Ye may judge by the sorry tale that follows.

Brother Guy—for I must call him brother—was the third son of Sir Geoffrey de Burgh, the Castellan. Ever a vexatious youth, one who united craft with violence, he sheltered his arrogance and debauchery behind the puissant name of his indulgent father, until in the

end he raped the only daughter of a faithful tenant and slew from ambush the brother who dared resent it. Sir Geoffrey was then compelled by the murmurs of honest men to use him in straiter fashion.

The upshot was that this young ruffian was given his choice between standing trial before the King's judges or renouncing the vanities of this world and taking the vows of our order. In the matter of receiving him, we were given no choice. Sir Geoffrey is our only bulwark against the raiders from over the border; his word goes far with us.

The shadow of the hangman's rope is wonderfully persuasive; it has brought many before now to exchange the tavern for the chapel and the lewd carouse for evensong. Some it has even changed in their hearts. But such was not the case with Brother Guy; his cell he looked upon as a prison cell, his brethren as mere fools. None enraged him more than those who showed a sincere concern for his salvation.

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There was among us a certain Brother Hugh, a man full of pious exhortations, lean and waxen-white as the candle he read by. Once I myself saw Brother Guy, maddened by his importunities, throw this Brother Hugh violently to the ground in the cloister garden. Brother Guy's face was red with choler and the cords of his neck were like bell ropes. How I wish I had then spoken to the Abbot Samson!

It fell on a hot afternoon in July that these two with four others were given light hand-axes by Tobias the Sacristan and sent to clear brush from the copse above the south barley field. Each man went severally to his task; none could say afterwards where his brothers had been or what chance might have befallen them.

One of the six, Brother Gregory, found that he had forgotten his water bottle. He worked steadily on until the parching sun had dipped halfway to the West, enduring his thirst as a kind of penance pleasing to God. At last his burning throat drove him to drop his axe and seek the stream that rushes down from the ridge on the far side of the copse.

The moment he emerged from the trees into the open glade along the stream, Brother Gregory cried aloud with such a

bellow as he would scarcely have believed his dry throat capable of producing. There with feet on the grassy verge and head face downward in the water lay the body of a man dressed in the habit of our order.

Drawn by the mighty shout the others came running, but Brother Hugh was not among them. His was the lifeless body they lifted from the water and laid tenderly on the grass. There was a deep, ugly gash above his left temple, a wound fit to kill a man much more robust than our poor brother.

Right then it was like to go hard with Brother Guy. His fellows knew well of the rancor he had harbored towards the dead man. Strong though he was, there were four of them, and he was but one. His fox-eyes and glib avowals of innocence were of no avail. The others hemmed him about with hard words and raised fists. But on that day the Lord in His mercy saved His consecrated house from a second deed of violence.

For the Abbot Samson had gone abroad to walk in the south fields together with Tobias the Sacristan and Matthew the Cellarer. Even as they drew near, guided first by the shout of Brother Gregory and then by the growing din of angry voices, Brother Guy was tripped up

and thrown heavily to the earth.

"My children," said the Abbot in the mildest of tones, "are we lawless men?"

As one man the four drew back and stood ashamed; such was the serene authority of Abbot Samson. In years he had then passed four score, but he bore his majestic frame as firmly as a young man. His snowy beard was marvellously thick and as long as the clapper on the great tower bell. Greatly revered for the piety of his life, he also inspired in common men a kind of awe by his learning, which went beyond theology and sacred history into the secret recesses of Nature.

When the Abbot Samson saw the body and heard how it had been discovered, he was grieved indeed. He looked long and earnestly at each of the five men in turn and asked, "Did you do this thing?"

He looked longest at Brother Guy, but that villain was only hardened in his heart by the safety the Abbot's presence afforded him. He swore that he knew nothing of the deed, and to the open disbelief and bitter taunts of his companions he would only reply, "Who among you saw this thing done and can speak with knowledge?"

It was, alas, true that no one had witnessed the crime.

Nonetheless all were sure in their hearts of the murderer's identity and determined not to let him escape unpunished. Brother Edmund it was who first suggested that Brother Guy be put to the trial by ordeal.

"If he be innocent, let him hold the white-hot iron in his hand," he shouted; and the others, all except Abbot Samson and Tobias the Sacristan, who knew his mind in this matter, took up the chorus: "Let him hold the white-hot iron!"

But Abbot Samson only shook his head and said, "My children, surely you know that two years since, the great Council held in the Lateran Palace forbade us to consecrate the barbarous and unreasoning custom for which you clamour. Are we lawless men, or do we obey the ordinances of our Church?"

No one dared to dispute these words, and when the Abbot charged Tobias the Sacristan with maintaining good order and himself retired into the copse to ask God's guidance, the others passed the interval in silence. Brother Guy sat apart from his fellows; that was the sole sign of the wrath and suspicion that divided them. He affected innocence and even slept for a brief time, pillowing his head on his arm. But perhaps

he only pretended to sleep, so that men might think his mind clear and unclouded by guilt.

Abbot Samson returned in a little more than an hour's space. In silence he strode to the corpse and knelt to examine the pitiful wound. Standing erect again he stared long and musingly into the stream whence the body had been lifted. At length he sent Matthew the Cellarer to our sacred house, with orders to bring back to him his staff and a certain scriptural book from his private apartments.

"And let whosoever you meet on the way return with you," he added. "This affair concerns us all."

Thus it happens that I myself was witness to the remainder of what is here set down. For I was one of the throng that pressed around Matthew the Cellarer on his return to the scene of the murder. We plied him eagerly with questions, but he could tell us only what I have already recounted.

When we arrived at the glade and saw the body of our murdered friend, our grief and indignation were redoubled. Nevertheless we straightway fell silent the moment Abbot Samson rose and took the staff and book from the hands of his faithful servant Matthew. There was such dignity and

firmness in the Abbot's countenance and gestures that we, who were men, were ashamed to act as little children.

He took his stand beside the body on the verge of the stream. The book he held in his left hand; his great shepherd's staff lay partly concealed in the grass at his feet. We, his flock, sat ourselves on the slope of the glade below the trees and waited for his words. The five brothers who had gone out to labor with the dead man sat in front.

The sun was very near now to the West and hidden in clouds; the day was still hot and close. The lightning that comes without rain played along the southern horizon from moment to moment and sometimes seemed to frame the Abbot's massive head in a nimbus of fire. It was a sight to unnerve a guilty man, though his bowels were made of brass.

"My children," he began, "ye know the sorrow and shame that have come upon us. That our brother has been taken from us we can bear; death comes to all. What we cannot bear is to go on from day to day breaking bread and chanting psalms with his slayer. Our house must be cleansed.

"Now ye know also that no one has confessed to the deed nor did anyone see it done.

Therefore in great distress of mind I went off alone into the weed to ask the Lord what I should do. And the Lord did not fail me: He led me in my wanderings to a hazel thicket, and He enabled my old eyes to descry, concealed in the centre of that thicket, this sign."

With these words he drew from the folds of his cassock a broken axe helve and brandished it aloft. Then he stepped forward and handed it to each of the five in turn, saying to them, "Do you recognize this stick of weed? Have you seen it before?"

They all vehemently denied any knowledge of it. Those who were sitting well forward and to the side said afterwards that they then saw fear in Brother Guy's eyes for the first time; I myself sat behind him and saw it not.

Abbot Samson sighed. "How much better it is," he went on, "for a guilty soul to unburden itself willingly! But what must be must be.

"So in my sojourn in the wood God led me to a broken axe helve. What was His meaning? It seemed to me that He was directing me to ask myself what made this wound in the head of our brother. No man could make such a wound with his fist. A sharp stone might have made it, but there are no

stones along this stretch of the stream. God, my children, was holding the missing axe before my eyes and making me see it. Find the axe, He seemed to say, and you will find the man who wielded it.

"I could not find it in the copse, although I saw there five undamaged axes with their helves. I had not seen it here in the open glade. Where could it be? I was sorely puzzled until God came to my aid and reminded me that our bulwark and stay in adversity is ever His holy word.

"Ye know the scriptures, my children. They are the meat and drink of your daily lives. Yet I would remind you of a wonderful incident in the life of the prophet Elisha."

Here the Abbot opened his book and began to read: (Translator's Note: according to the division of the Bible into chapters first made by Cardinal de Sancto Caro about 50 years after Abbot Samson's death, he read from the beginning of II Kings:6)

"1. And the sons of the prophets said unto Elisha, Behold now, the place where we dwell with thee is too strait for us.

"2. Let us go, we pray thee, unto Jordan, and take thence every man a beam, and let us make a place there, where we

may dwell. And he answered, Go ye.

"3. And one said, Be content, I pray thee, and go with thy servants. And he answered, I will go.

"4. So he went with them. And when they came to Jordan, they cut down wood.

"5. But as one was felling a beam, the axe head fell into the water; and he cried, and said, Alas, master! for it was borrowed.

"6. And the man of God said, Where fell it? And he showed him the place. And he cut down a stick, and cast it thither; and the iron did swim.

"The iron did swim, my children. The prophet Elisha was a man of power, and I am one of the lowliest and most unworthy of God's servants. Yet what God has done once He can assuredly do again. I say let the iron come forth and accuse the guilty man."

As he spoke, he grasped his long shepherd's staff by its straight end and thrust the crooked end into the running stream. Twilight was near; it was the time of day when green leaves begin to look black against the sky. We all drew in our breath, leaning forward to peer at the stream, which was not deep there, but turbid with sand scoured up by the current.

And who will say that the

Lord is not a God of Justice? With my own eyes I saw it. As the Abbot Samson drew his staff towards him, a blade clove the surface of the water like the fin of an iron fish. A thing possessed, it swam straight towards the Abbot's outstretched hand—but he was never to grasp it. Just as his fingers were about to touch the metal, it rose from the water like a thing with life and flung itself at the feet of Brother Guy.

Tobias the Sacristan has told me since that the blade of this particular axe was notched and nicked where some want-thrift had used it to draw nails from the chancel reef. He says, further, that he well remembers issuing it after the noon meal to Brother Guy—a flawed tool to a flawed man, he thought to himself at the time. By this means, he claims, the crime could have been fixed on the guilty man.

But the Lord required no such mediation. Brother Guy, for all his bluster, was not proof against His might. Almost before the axe came to rest, he was on his knees, confessing not only to the murder of Brother Hugh but also to the other murder, the one he committed before he came among us. It was not a pretty tale, nor was it a pretty sight; the bullies are ever the blubberers. I

draw a veil over it. Let it suffice to know that he was handed over to the King's justice with the ungrudging consent of his powerful father. Young as he was, his tale was told.

Honesty compels me to report an opinion that grieves me. There are some even among us (I name no names) who have little faith in the power of the Lord to work His will. These men say that Abbot Samson had Matthew the Cellarer bind a potent lodestone onto the crook of his staff.

They say, moreover, that with this lodestone he dredged the axe from the shallow waters; and while our eyes were fixed upon the axe and the Abbot's left hand, which was stretched towards it, he—like some prestidigitator—sent the blade flying to Brother Guy by means of a rapid flick of the staff in his right hand.

Such men set more store by the sharpness of their eyes than the keenness of their faith. And suppose that what they say is true? What of it? The lodestone, is that not also a work of God?

"Q"

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Titles and Data Supplied by the Publishers

a **NEW** short story by

R. L. STEVENS

Pete Traven was a junior editor who spent all his working hours reading "slush"—the unsolicited manuscripts that come to a publisher's office in the mail, manuscripts from unknown, usually unpublished, authors. It is a grueling, thankless, unrewarding job—except that there is always the long-shot chance that one of the submissions is The Great American Novel . . .

THE GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL

by **R. L. STEVENS**

*She was curled on the bed like a
stired question mark awaiting
the answer of his body.*

I read it over a second time but it didn't change. I flipped the pages till I reached the next chapter, but it was just as bad. "Lunchtime, Pete," someone called as he passed my cubicle. I nodded agreement and tossed the manuscript back on my desk. I needed some lunch to revive me.

We weren't top-echelon editors authorized to entertain authors on expense accounts, so we usually gravitated to the formica-countered coffee shops that lined the side streets off Fifth Avenue. They were good places for lunch—inexpensive,

fast, and convenient. And they gave me a chance to meet and mingle with the slush readers from some of the other big publishing houses.

In fact, that was how I met Gilda—the only girl I ever knew who was named after a Rita Hayworth movie. Gilda was a slush reader at Associated Publishers, though she sported a classier title than that when signing rejection letters. She was just two years out of college and still had something of the cheerleader about her.

"Hi, Pete," she said as she slid onto the stool next to me. "How goes the slush at Ryder & Ryder?"

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"Same old stuff. I keep hoping for another *Ulysses*, but at this point I'd settle for another *Carpetbaggers*. Anything!"

She ordered a sandwich and Coke. "Is Brady still riding you?"

Sam Brady was a 35-year-old managing editor trying hard to be the top man at Ryder & Ryder. Sometimes, when he couldn't take out his frustrations on executive editor Carlos Winter, he settled for me instead. "He's been in Washington at the ABA convention," I said. "But he's due back this afternoon."

"All you need is to find one good manuscript, Pete, and you'll have Brady's job."

"It's not quite that easy. I wish it were."

Gilda took a bite of her sandwich and thought about it. "I wish I could write. I'd write you the biggest, sexiest best-seller you ever saw! And you'd get credit for it!"

"I'm afraid Ryder & Ryder doesn't go for sexy best-sellers," I told her. "They're more interested in quotes literature unquote."

"That's Carlos Winter's influence."

I had to agree. Winter was the grand old man of New York editorial circles. He'd been at Scribners in the early days of Hemingway, and worked with

Pascal Covici when Steinbeck was first beginning to write. Though well past normal retirement age, he showed no sign of surrendering the editorial reins of Ryder & Ryder.

"Winter has certainly been nice to me," I said. "Even when he's loading me down with slush manuscripts, he always has time for a kind word."

Gilda finished her sandwich and Coke, and we strolled for a few minutes down Fifth Avenue until it was time to get back to work. In the elevator I ran into Winter himself, coming back early for a meeting. "How are you, Pete? Read any good manuscripts?"

"Not a thing, Mr. Winter. I keep hoping, though."

"That's the way." He nodded his white mane philosophically.

Back at my desk I found another batch of manuscripts from Carlos Winter's secretary. They'd come in the morning mail, addressed to him personally, and I was to read and report on them. Her note told me to spread them around if I couldn't handle them all, but with Winter's slush I always made an effort to get through it myself. A writer who knew the name of Carlos Winter had at least that much going for him.

The first couple of manuscripts I glanced at seemed to be more of the same—a novel

about a young man's awakening and an intensely written book about the Arab-Israeli conflict. I tossed them both aside for later consideration. The third one was different. It even looked different. Its 300-odd typewritten pages were spiral-bound—something I'd never seen on a manuscript—and it had a stiff brown cover with the title and author's name neatly labeled: *Years of Earth* by Sumner Doud Chapin. I liked the title and I liked the author's name. Somehow they both had a literary ring about them.

The book itself was a novel set in the mid-twenties, which perked my interest right away. Sam Brady had told us only a few days earlier to be on the lookout for nostalgia items. It was well written for an unknown, and the earthy atmosphere of struggling farmers came through well. I settled down for a satisfying afternoon's reading.

"Is Pete Traven around?" Brady's voice interrupted my concentration after the first hour. I'd shifted to an empty cubicle to escape the phone.

"In here, Mr. Brady," I called out.

He poked his head in. "You hiding, Traven?"

"No, Mr. Brady. Just reading slush for Mr. Winter."

He glanced down at the manuscript. "I see. I wanted you to run an errand for me, but I'll get someone else." Running errands for Sam Brady was nothing unusual. He treated us all like office boys.

"I'll be glad to do it," I said.

"No, no, go on with your work." He turned to leave and then asked, "Is it any good?"

"I'll tell you—it's the best manuscript I've read in a year."

"Good! You looked as if you were enjoying it."

"It might fit your nostalgia angle. It's about a farm family back in the twenties. The sons that were supposed to carry on the farm all went off to war and didn't return. They got a taste of the city and liked it. The guy's quite a writer. A bit slow in spots, but good, real good."

Brady nodded. "Maybe we've got something. Take it in to Carlos as soon as you finish."

It was after five when I finished the last page of *Years of Earth*, but I stayed on to write my report while the manuscript was still fresh in my mind. *Sumner Doud Chapin is a writer of the twenties*, I wrote glowingly. *One might almost call him a rural Fitzgerald.*

My report ran three pages. I left it with the manuscript on the desk of Winter's secretary,

where she'd find it first thing in the morning. Then I went home, satisfied with my job for the first time in a long while.

It was a week before Carlos Winter summoned me to his office. That was something of a treat in itself, since I hadn't been there long enough to be invited to attend the weekly editorial meetings. In fact, the last time I'd sat opposite the cluttered oak desk with its ship model and lighthouse lamp was the day I was hired.

"I read *Years of Earth* last night," he began, busily tamping the tobacco into his pipe. "Your recommendation of it was sound. It's a fine book."

"Then we'll publish it?"

My voice must have betrayed my excitement because he smiled as he answered. "Now, now, we don't rush into these things! The novel is publishable, certainly—but it needs work. Parts of it are terribly dull going, and I think it could use a bit more of the flavor of the period. Tell you what—this Chapin lives right here in Greenwich Village. His phone number's on the manuscript. Ring him up and arrange a meeting here. I'll sit in on it, but I want you to do most of the work with him."

"I've never done any real editing."

"Then it's time you got started, isn't it?"

I left his office walking on a cloud. Maybe I'd make it to being an editor after all! I sat down in my cubicle and dialed the number on Sumner Chapin's manuscript.

"Hello?" a feminine voice answered after the fourth ring.

"Is this the residence of Sumner Doud Chapin?"

She hesitated, then answered, "Yes."

"Could I speak to him, please?"

"Well—he's not here now."

"When do you expect him?"

"He works during the day."

"Is there any place I could reach him?" I asked, and then added, "I'm calling from Ryder & Ryder, about a manuscript he submitted."

"Oh! Could I have him call you back? Or could you call here this evening?"

"I'll call," I said. "After dinner."

I hung up the phone, a bit disappointed at not having made immediate contact with Chapin. I should have figured he'd be working. Unpublished authors have to live on something. I picked up his covering letter and read through its bare sentences again. He didn't say where he worked—only that this was the first story he'd ever tried to publish.

I phoned again from my apartment, a little before eight. The same girl answered the phone, but this time she put Chapin on at once. "My name's Pete Traven," I said. "I'm in the editorial department at Ryder & Ryder."

"Yes." The voice was a low monotone, devoid of expression.

"We like your novel, *Years of Earth*, very much. If you'd consent to a few minor changes we'd like to publish it."

"No changes," the voice said.

"No changes? I don't think you understand, Mr. Chapin—"

"You wish to publish, send me contract."

"Would it be possible for you to come to our office, Mr. Chapin? We're right up on Fifth Avenue—"

"Impossible. I work every day."

"On your lunch hour, perhaps?"

"No."

"You don't seem to understand, Mr. Chapin. We want to publish your novel."

"Send me contract," he repeated. I thought I caught a trace of an accent, but I couldn't be certain.

"Our executive editor, Carlos Winter, would like to meet you personally," I said, playing my last card.

"I cannot meet. Send contract."

"I'll have to get back to you, Mr. Chapin," I decided. I hung up and sat staring at the telephone, not knowing exactly what to do next. I hated to report failure to Carlos Winter on the first assignment he'd ever given me.

But by morning there seemed no alternative. I repeated the telephone conversation in Winter's office, with Sam Brady and the rest of the editorial board sitting in. It was just before their weekly meeting, at which they planned to discuss Chapin's manuscript.

"The hell with him!" was Brady's immediate response. "He needs us more than we need him!"

"Now, now," Winter cautioned. "Perhaps we have another Salinger or Pynchon here—a writer who craves anonymity. It might even be a pleasant change from those fellows who show up here once a month to be taken out to lunch!"

"You going to go crawling to him?" Brady grumbled.

"There's no crawling involved. After all, we work with most writers by mail. I only suggested a personal meeting because the man lives here in New York."

"Then what do you suggest?"

Winter turned toward me.

"Pete, could you go down to

Chapin's apartment with the contract? Explain to him that the changes would be minimal. Most of them could be done right here in the office and submitted for his approval."

"Sure," I agreed, anxious for a chance to redeem myself in Winter's eyes. "I could do that."

"Good! It's settled, then. We'll have the contract drawn up today."

When I called Chapin's number the following morning, the girl answered again. I announced that I would be coming down that evening if it was convenient. She said it would be. Sumner Doud Chapin would be in.

I took the subway downtown after a quick sandwich at a coffee shop that evening. Alighting at the West 4th Street Station, I found myself only a few blocks from Chapin's address. The evening was warm and the summer sun had not yet set. A few children were in the streets. Near the corner of Eighth Street an artist was setting up his paintings against the wire fence of a parking lot, waiting for the tourists who would surely come.

I found the building I sought without any trouble and climbed to the third-floor apartment. The name *Chapin* was on a card thumbtacked to

the door. Beneath it another card read: *Rose*. I knocked on the door.

A dark-haired girl in jeans and a sleeveless shirt answered the door. I knew at once it had been her voice on the phone. "Miss Rose? I'm Pete Traven from Ryder & Ryder."

"Come in." She tried a smile but it seemed forced. "Sumner will be with you in a minute."

The apartment was starkly furnished in approved Village style, with a half-finished abstract painting on an easel near the windows. "Is that yours?" I asked. "It's very good."

"Thank you."

Before I could say more, the bedroom door opened and a large bearded man came out. "You the guy from the publisher?" he asked in a deep angry voice. "Let's get on with it. I'm busy."

"You're Sumner Doud Chapin?"

"That's right."

"The author of *Years of Earth*?"

"Sure. Did you bring the contract?"

"How about some beer, Sumner?" the girl asked.

"Nah, not now. How about you?"

"No, thanks." I drew the manuscript and contract from my attaché case. "Now there are just a few points we'd like

you to think about changing."

"You handle all that. Just gimme the contract." He took the document and scanned it quickly. "Only \$1500 advance?"

"At Ryder & Ryder that's customary for first novels."

"Okay." He flipped through the rest of the pages with what seemed like mild interest. Finally he signed each copy and Miss Rose signed as a witness. I glanced at her signature and saw that her first name was Helen.

"We'll send you an edited copy of the manuscript," I said, "so you can approve the changes we make."

"Sure, sure." He turned to the girl. "I'll have that beer now, Helen."

After a few more minutes of conversation I left the apartment and hurried downstairs. I was at my wits' end, not knowing what to do. Of one thing I was certain—the man who'd signed the contract was not Sumner Doud Chapin. He was not the author of the manuscript in my attaché case. And his was not the voice I'd spoken to on the telephone.

I went no farther than the corner, where I crossed over to the other side and took up a position in the doorway of a record shop. From there I had a good view of the building I'd just left. If I was correct, the

man I'd met would not be staying there long. I couldn't imagine Helen Rose calling him Sumner any longer than was necessary.

I didn't have long to wait. About fifteen minutes later the bearded man came down the front steps and headed west, toward Eighth Avenue. Though I had no immediate plan, I followed him.

He walked about a block before disappearing into a dimly lit bar in the basement of an old brick building. I paused a moment, thought about it, and followed him inside. There were only men along the bar, mostly young, and every one of them turned to watch my entrance. I walked past them and joined the bearded man at a table toward the rear.

"Hey! Whatcha doin' here?"

"I should ask you the same thing. Your girl won't approve, will she?"

He waved away the words with his hand. "She's not my girl."

"And you're not Sumner Doud Chapin. Right?"

He stared into his beer and didn't answer.

I slipped a bill from my wallet and slid it across the table. "Right?"

The gesture seemed to embarrass him but he took the money. "Ah, she gave me twenty bucks to say I was Cha-

pin and sign those papers. I don't even know her."

"Where's the real Chapin?"

"Who the hell knows? Who cares?"

I shook my head and left, climbing back up to the twilight street. Well, I'd certainly made a mess of things. I had a contract with a forged signature, and the real Sumner Doud Chapin was as much a mystery as ever.

And the only way to find the real Chapin was through the girl, Helen Rose.

She opened the door, saw my face, and immediately tried to close the door. But I had my foot in, and I pushed hard. "What in hell do you want?" she yelled at me.

"The real Sumner Chapin. Ryder & Ryder isn't paying out fifteen hundred bucks just because you hire some bearded guy to sign Chapin's name. Where is he?"

"Away."

"Away where? In prison?"

"Just away."

"I spoke to him on the phone, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"Then he can't be very far away."

Her eyes darted to the clock, then back to my face. She seemed frightened of something but I didn't know what. It was

an old banjo clock that hung on the wall near the door, and its hands were just one minute away from nine.

"Are you expecting—?" I began, and my question was answered for me by the sound of a key in the lock.

I was on my feet, starting for the door, when she screamed behind me, "Sumner! Run! He's here!"

I yanked open the door in time to catch a glimpse of someone on the stairs. "Come back, damn it!" I shouted, and started after him.

The stairs were in darkness, and I could see nothing below me. He was running, though, and the sound of his footsteps reached me clearly. When I got to the first floor he was nowhere in sight, but I realized the front door hadn't opened. He had to be hiding somewhere close by.

"Chapin," I said. "I know you're here. I just want to talk with you."

I stepped around the back of the staircase and heard a movement in the dark. Then there was a flash of pain as something struck me across the head and I went down hard.

"What happened to you?" Sam Brady asked the next morning as he surveyed the bandage on my head.

"Walked into a door," I mumbled. I was anxious to see Carlos Winter and didn't want to be sidetracked.

Winter listened to my story in sympathetic silence. When I'd finished he said, "I certainly didn't imagine for a moment I was getting you into anything like that. The man is obviously deranged."

"It would seem so," I agreed, placing a gentle hand to the bump on my head.

"Did you try to see the girl again when you regained consciousness?"

"No. I guess I was a little afraid at that point."

"The contract? The manuscript?"

"Both safe in my case. He took nothing."

"Odd," Carlos Winter murmured. "The entire business is extremely odd."

"It sure is! What do we do now?"

Winter shrugged. "Return the manuscript, I suppose. We can't publish it without a valid contract."

I went back to my desk deep in gloom. It had been my first real discovery, and now it had simply melted away, like the morning snow that turns to slush in the streets of Manhattan.

At lunch that day I met Gilda and told her what had

happened. "There'll be other manuscripts, Pete. I'm more concerned about your head! Did you report it to the police?"

"No. Nothing was stolen, and my story wouldn't have made much sense. They'd have listed it as an attempted mugging."

"But why should this Chapin attack you? It doesn't seem like the best way to get his novel published."

"There's something strange about the whole business. And it's a heck of a lot more than just a shy author."

I went back to the office in a state of depression. The pile of slush manuscripts from the day's mail held no promise for me any longer. The chances of finding another novel as good as *Years of Earth* seemed remote in the extreme.

When my telephone rang I answered it automatically. For a second I thought it was Sam Brady, complaining that I'd taken too long for lunch. But then the voice identified itself.

"This is Sumner Doud Chapin."

"Oh?" I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"I'm sorry about last night."

For some reason that angered me. "You sure as hell should be sorry! My head still hurts!"

"I think I could discuss the book now, with Carlos Winter."

"You do, huh? Well, let me

tell you something, Mr. Chapin, I doubt very much whether Ryder & Ryder still wants to publish your book!"

"Could I speak to Mr. Winter about it? I can explain my odd behavior."

I had to admit the voice sounded more friendly and rational than the first time we'd talked. There was still an odd muffled accent about it, but the tone was more relaxed. "Winter is out right now. I can speak to him and call you back."

"I'm phoning from work. I'd better call you. In an hour?"

I said that was agreeable and hung up. Was it possible that Chapin was some sort of split personality—a genius of a writer who turned into a madman periodically?

When Carlos Winter returned, I asked to see him. I relayed the telephone message and waited for his reaction. When it came it surprised me. "All right, I suppose I can talk to him. There's no harm in that."

Back at my desk, while I waited for the call, I had a thought. I got out the Manhattan phone book and looked up Chapin's name. He wasn't listed. Then I looked up Helen Rose. She was listed, with the phone number I'd called that first time. As I'd suspected, the apartment was hers. Chapin

might well be living there, or he might be living somewhere else.

Exactly on the hour my telephone rang. But this time it wasn't Chapin. It was Helen Rose. "He couldn't call back," she explained. "He asked me to call for him."

I went into Winter's office and told him. "Put her on," he said, and took the call, motioning me to remain in the office.

I could tell from his end of the conversation that she was arranging a meeting between Winter and Chapin. He tried to schedule it for the office during working hours, but obviously she was resisting. Finally he agreed to come to the apartment that evening. When he hung up he said to me, "I want you along, Pete. For protection, as much as anything."

I touched my bandaged head. "I'm afraid I'm not very good at that."

"You'll be good enough."

I had a sudden sense of danger, of walking into something I didn't fully understand. But with Carlos Winter I was willing to risk it.

A soft rain had started to fall by the time we reached the Village that evening. It made the narrow streets dimmer, the sidewalks almost deserted, the buildings somehow forbidding.

"This is it," I said as the cab dropped us at the corner. "The second doorway."

We climbed the stairs as I had done twice the previous night and knocked at Helen Rose's door. But one thing was different about the door tonight. The two name cards had been removed. The door was bare. "No answer," Winter said, and knocked again.

"Try the door," I suggested.

It swung open at his touch and we entered the apartment.

It was empty.

The banjo clock, the few chairs, the sparse furnishings—all were gone.

"Strange," I said.

"Perhaps not so strange." Though the apartment seemed surely empty, Carlos Winter raised his voice. "We're here. You can come out now, Mr. Chapin."

I saw the bathroom door start to move and a chill ran down my spine. I felt a touch of fear—the fear of the unknown. Then the door swung wide and I saw that it wasn't Sumner Doud Chapin at all. It was Sam Brady from the office.

But he was pointing a gun at us.

I glanced at Carlos Winter, but there was no surprise on his face. He nodded slightly, as if the presence of Sam Brady

with a gun only confirmed what he'd been thinking all along.

"So it's finally come out in the open, has it, Sam?"

"It's out in the open, Carlos. You knew all along, didn't you? That's why you didn't come here alone."

Winter gestured toward me. "I felt this young man should be present. After all, he's the one who disrupted your scheme in the first place."

"Scheme?" I repeated, uncomprehending. "But where is Chapin?"

"Standing right here in front of us," Winter said. "And looking more like a thug than an author or editor."

"What about *Years of Earth*?" I wanted to know. "Did he write it? Mr. Winter, that book could win the Pulitzer Prize!"

"It already did," Carlos Winter answered dryly. "In fact, it won the Pulitzer under its real title more than forty years ago."

"So I wasn't able to fool you," Sam Brady said. He was still pointing the gun at us, though neither of us had raised our hands. "I thought I could."

"I'm sure." Winter carefully shifted position, but did not try to get any closer to the weapon. "There must be half a dozen Pulitzer novels from the twenties and early thirties that are unknown today. Books like *The*

Able McLaughlins and *Years of Grace and Lamb in His Bosom* are unread and unreprinted. Their authors are all but forgotten. By plagiarizing one of those books—having your girl friend type it up as a new work—you hoped to trick Ryder & Ryder into publishing it.”

“Wait a minute,” I argued. “That doesn’t make any sense, Mr. Winter. A first novelist never gets much of an advance and surely once the book was published someone would remember it! What could he hope to gain by stealing a novel that had won the Pulitzer Prize?”

Carlos Winter drew a deep breath. “Embarrassment,” he answered. “Embarrassment so great it would force my retirement from the company. It would be the greatest literary hoax since the Clifford Irving affair, and I would be the goat because I bought and published the book.” There was a faint smile on his lips as he spoke those words. “You wanted my job that badly, did you, Sam?”

“But where did I come in?” I asked.

“Brady knew you’d read the book first when it came in with the slush. He carefully prepared you by saying we were anxious to publish some nostalgia. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, and he checked on me while I was reading it. But you

mean it was Mr. Brady’s voice on the telephone?” Even as I spoke I remembered my first impression that the voice was Brady’s.

“It was his voice,” Winter confirmed. “If we’d sent the contract by mail, his scheme might even have worked. But when we wanted to meet him in person, they had to ring in a substitute. You didn’t fall for that, Pete, and you confronted the Rose woman with the truth. You even chased Sam down the stairs and got hit on the head. Of course I never would have countersigned the contract anyway—I just wanted to bring them into the open. With your help, I did it.”

“But why this meeting?” I asked. “And why an empty apartment?”

“Sam can’t get me out through a hoax, so he’s going to try murder. Right, Sam? Isn’t that why your girl friend cleared out with all her possessions?”

Sam Brady didn’t answer.

“But now you’ll have to kill two of us. Is my job worth that much, Sam? Is it?”

“I can’t turn back now,” Brady said, but his voice betrayed him. He was close to breaking.

“I left an envelope with my secretary, Sam. The whole story’s in it.”

That was when he broke. The gun suddenly lowered till it pointed at the floor. "All right, Carlos. You've won. Get yourself a new managing editor." He turned and walked out of the empty apartment.

For a full minute I stood frozen to the spot. "Was he really going to kill us?"

"I don't think so," Carlos Winter said. "Not really. When it came right down to it he didn't have the guts."

I went to the window and looked down at the street. The rain had stopped and the evening's tourists were begin-

ning to arrive. I could see Sam Brady crossing the street and mingling with them. "How did you know about the manuscript?" I asked. "You couldn't have remembered the book from over forty years ago!"

Carlos Winter smiled. "I've been in publishing a long time, Pete. I started out reading slush, just like you. I read that very book when it was first submitted to my company, all those years ago. I read it and sent it back. Believe me, when you've rejected a Pulitzer Prize winner, you always remember it."

"Q"

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Hitchhiking can be dangerous . . . Was there hitchhiking in Shakespeare's time? Riding double on horseback? On the top of a coach? And was it in those days "the way to dusty death"? . . . a tough and timely story of today . . .

THE LONG RIDE

by **JERROLD PHAON**

Alvin Wexler was on his way home from Medford City, chugging along in his vintage 1949 Ford pickup at an even 35 miles an hour. He saw the hitchhikers long before he reached them. There were two of them, one standing at the side of the road with his thumb out, the other sitting down on a sleeping bag, trying to relax in the harsh glaring heat.

Hippie types, Alvin thought. He could always spot them miles away, with their weird clothes and their slouched passive manner of watchin' the world go by. That's all you saw bummin' on the highways any more.

He spat his wad of tobacco out the open window and started pumping the brakes,

ramming the pedal nearly to the floor before the brakes started to grab. The truck groaned to a stop alongside the hitchhikers, then wheezed and almost stalled. Alvin leaned across the seat and smiled through the open window. "Need a lift, folks?"

"Sure thing," the young man said. He might have smiled, but it was hard to tell with that thick bush of a mustache hanging over his upper lip. He looked like all the other hippies Alvin had ever seen: faded patched dungarees, wide belt and large buckle, grimy sweat-shirt, faded Army fatigue jacket folded over one arm. But a big kid, with strong shoulders and muscled arms.

The young man turned to the

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other hitchhiker, sitting beneath Alvin's view from the truck, and said, "C'mon, Susan. A ride."

A boy and a girl, Alvin thought. Well, that wasn't so strange, either. He'd seen a lot of that these days. Couldn't hardly tell the difference anyways: the boys looked like girls, and the girls looked like boys. The girl also wore boots and wranglers, with a wide belt and heavy masculine buckle. Long straight hair, not quite blonde and not quite brown, and a head band, Indian fashion.

She was a pretty girl, tall and willowy, but not what you'd call skinny. She had on a soft blue and red jersey that fitted her like a road map the way it showed all the curves. And no brassiere, either, Alvin thought. Hippies, all right. He said, "C'mon now, git in."

The young man yanked open the door and stood aside while the girl climbed up into the cab next to Alvin. Then the boy tossed the sleeping bag onto the floor and climbed in himself. He slammed the door, but it wouldn't close.

"Got to slam 'er real hard," Alvin said.

The young man tried again. The door still wouldn't close.

"Dern junk heap of mine," Alvin apologized. "Lemme give 'er a whack." He leaned across

them, letting his forearm brush against the girl ever so slightly, not even intentionally, really, just enough to make his arm tingle with the softness. He yanked on the handle and pulled. Whank! "S'cuse me, miss."

He dropped his hand to the Schmidt's Beer gear-shift knob, eased the lever into gear, and brought the truck lurching into motion. His arm still tingled.

He went through the gears, the engine whining, coughing, until the movement of the truck brought the engine to a steady throb. He drove down the road for about a mile without saying anything. It was a lonesome road, little used now that the state had built a modern four-lane expressway approximately six miles west of it. But Alvin didn't like the expressway. The cars and trucks went much too fast, always whizzing by, pushing you around.

He preferred to take his time on Old Forty, the name given to the road by the local farmers who used it because of the forty miles of empty wooded wilderness it crossed between Medford City and Adington.

The shoulders of the road were red clay and the wind scooted up a lot of dust that settled in the cab. It was hot in the cab, even though there was

a little breeze from the movement of the truck. The odor of body sweat mingled with the smell of burnt oil from the engine. A gypsy moth fluttered near the window vent.

"Goin' far?" Alvin asked.

"As far as you'll take us," the young man said.

Alvin nodded. He kept his eyes on the road. After another mile he said, "You folks got names?"

"Sure," the girl said. "I'm Susan. This is Dom."

"No last names?"

"We don't need them," the girl said. "It isn't the name that counts. It's the person. How he is inside. That's how we feel about it."

"Well, folks round these parts call me Alvin. Alvin Wexler. But I guess just plain ol' Alvin to you folks."

"There don't seem to be too many people around these parts," the young man said.

"There's some. Ain't many. Mostly just small farms and sech. Patch farms, we call 'em."

"It seems so deserted," Susan said.

"What makes you folks take this route?" Alvin asked. "I seen a lot of young folks along this road. Couldn't never figger out why, with that new highway just over yonder."

"The police won't allow hitchhikers on it," the young

man said. "Not even on the ramps."

"Don't seem fair," Alvin said. They were going up a hill and he had to almost shout above the heavy drone of the motor. He down-shifted to a lower gear.

"We were lucky you came along," the young man said. "We'd been standing out in that sun for hours."

They reached the top of the rise and the motor, released from all that labor, ran more quietly. "Most folks don't stop for hitchhikers nowadays," Alvin said. He glanced at the girl. "Hear too many bad things about folks who stop and get beat over the head or killed and thrown in a ditch. 'Course, I don't worry about it none. I get pretty lonesome drivin' along by myself. Like to have company. Somebody to talk to."

"If you ask me," Susan said, "it isn't the people who stop who have to worry. It's the poor hitchhiker. I can tell you from experience. Isn't that right, Dom?"

Dom grunted. He was busy staring out the windshield at the miles and miles of passing wilderness. A quiet man, Alvin thought. But he liked to look at things. Watch them. There were moments, while he was driving, when Alvin thought he could feel the young man's eyes

boring into him. Watching. Then the young man dug around in his pockets until he came out with a cigarette.

Probably one of them maryjane cigarettes, Alvin thought. What's it they call 'em nowadays? Them Chicanos he worked with that one summer when he was 18, Lord, years ago, they give him a maryjane cigarette, but, hell, he didn't get nothin' out of it. Not like he got from a good jug of corn, like the one he had settin' right there on the floorboards.

Just thinking about it made him thirsty, and he reached down, past the gearshift, past the girl's legs, an added bonus, and got hold of the jug. He swung it up to his lap and uncorked it. "Mind if I take a snort?" he asked.

"Go right ahead," Dom said.

"Don't mind us," Susan said.

He took a quick gulp and lowered the jug. It felt good going down—tingled his throat almost as much as brushing against the girl had tingled his arm.

"What is that stuff?" It was the girl, Susan.

"Corn whiskey," he said.

"May I try it?"

They always want to, he thought. He smiled. "Sure. He's yourself."

She hefted the jug the way a man would, the way she'd seen

Alvin do it, and let a little of the brown liquid slosh down her throat. She lowered the jug, gagging, some of the stuff dripping down her chin.

"Purty strong stuff," Alvin said.

"Strong!" Susan gasped when she recovered her voice. "That stuff is like deisel fuel. Oh, wow! Dom, do you want to try?"

"No, thanks," Dom said.

"Takes gittin' used to, I admit," Alvin said. "Made it myself."

"Do you have your own still?" Susan asked.

"Sure. Most folks do, round these parts. 'Course, we don't let on none. Don't want revenuers comin' around."

"Revenuers!" the girl howled. She pronounced it "revenooers," the way Alvin had pronounced it. "Oh, wow, Dom. What a groove!" She couldn't stop laughing.

Even the boy, this Dom fella, with his watchin', quiet ways, even he was smilin', Alvin thought. Well, Ol' Alvin aims to please. That's what these young folks comin' through always seemed to want, a bit of what they called local color. Alvin knew quite a bit about what they wanted. Yes, indeed. "Reckon it ain't much different from you young folks and your maryjane," he said.

"Our what?" Susan asked.

"He means grass," Dom said.

"Oh." She leaned back against Dom and regarded Alvin from half-opened eyes. Alvin could feel her stare burning into him, making him feel all hot around the throat. He hefted the jug and took another swallow, then lowered the jug again and swung the old truck back to the center of the road.

"Hey, can I try some more of that stuff?" Susan said. She took the jug from Alvin's lap, downed a stiff jolt, and wiped the wetness from her mouth with the back of her hand. "Oh, wow!" she said. "I feel dizzy."

"It don't take much," Alvin said. "Not when it's two hundred proof."

"Oh, wow!"

"Good for almost anything. Liver ailment, shakes, the wastin' away, snake bite. You name it."

"I imagine that stuff is a little hard to take on an empty stomach," Dom said. "Isn't there a town near here?"

"Ain't far now," Alvin said. He took another stiff one, felt the truck weave, and corrected his course. He glanced at the young man, caught him watching again.

The girl squeezed in against the boy, those long willowy legs stretched out in those tight wranglers, beneath Alvin's eyes. Under her legs was the

sleeping bag, rolled up and tied with rope to make a sling. Only one sleepin' bag for the both of 'em, Alvin thought. That's the way it was with young folks these days, especially these hippie types.

This young fella, this Dom, he was a pretty lucky fella to have a girl like Susan. And there he sits, Alvin thought. Calm and casual-like, with that pretty young girl rubbin' up against him like that. Soft. Just thinking about it made Alvin hotter. A gob of spit caught in his throat and he almost choked.

He hefted the jug again and took another snort, and then the girl was right up against him, taking the jug from his lap, right out of his lap, and leaving the pressure where the jug had been resting burning right through him. She leaned back against the young man, those black eyes of hers smirking up at Alvin, letting the likker run down her chin like that. Oh, Lord!

She's a temptress, this Susan, Alvin thought. Just like Molly over to Medford City. Small bones, delicate and thin like his Grandma's china, but, oh, Lord, tough as nails down deep, and when he thought about that now his throat went parched and dry and he needed another drink real bad.

Molly. He'd never stop thinkin' about her now. Every time he went to Medford City he stopped off at Hattie Castle's place and asked for Molly. Wouldn't go with no other girl in the place. Why, he'd even asked Molly to get married and come away with him, settle down, lead a decent life. Didn't care what kind of life she lived before. But when he asked her to come away with him she just sat there and laughed and laughed until he couldn't take no more and he ran out of Hattie's place burning with shame.

Still, he couldn't keep away. He kept going back and going back, and then when Molly asked him to drive her to Adington, why, he took her. That had been a long ride, that one, and after it was over he knew he wouldn't be seeing her no more. That was more than 15 years ago, and Hattie Castle's place wasn't even around no more. But he still thought about it, still remembered.

Then Dom said, "Hey, Alvin, just where is this town of yours?"

"Ain't far, ain't far!" Alvin almost shouted. He gripped the steering wheel tight, leaning out over it, his forehead almost touching the windshield. Then he saw the turnoff he was look-

ing for up ahead and he made a sharp right onto a narrow dirt lane. Immediately the truck began to bounce and rattle over the potholes.

"Hey, what the hell is this?" Dom said. "There isn't any town back this way. Where the hell are you taking us?"

Alvin didn't answer. He held onto the steering wheel to keep the truck from going all over the road. He was sweating and, oh, Lord, he needed a drink.

"Dom—" the girl said. She sounded frightened.

"This crazy hick's gone berserk!" Dom said. He started jiggling the door handle. "Listen, mister, I don't know what your game is but I think you better stop and let us out. This is the end of the line, man! I mean it!"

"Jest hold on, hold on!" Alvin said. "Almost there." The truck bounced along another 50 yards, and then Alvin began pumping the brakes until the truck slowed and finally shuddered to a complete stop. "Okay, folks," he said, "git out! Git! The ride's over."

"I don't know what your game is," Dom said, still fighting with the door handle, "but you're crazy. You're out of your tree."

Alvin felt himself begin to shake, felt the outrage build. "I said, *git out!*"

The door sprang open and the young man leaped to the road. He reached back inside for the sleeping bag and helped the girl down. He glared at Alvin. "It takes all kinds," he snarled, then slammed the door hard. It banged shut with a tinny ring.

Alvin sat in the truck and watched them in the rear-view mirror as they headed back down the road, toward the highway. He was beginning to tremble with anticipation. He reached down for the jug and hefted it for another deep swallow. It felt good going down, burning and warm and good. His trembling stopped and he started laughing. Laughing and laughing. Lo-ord! It was a good trick, he thought. Just like always. A good trick.

When he was done laughing, Alvin got out of the truck. The young man and the girl were still walking toward the highway. Alvin went to the back, climbed into the bed of the pickup, and pulled a 30-30 lever-action Winchester from under a canvas tarp. The rifle was a real beauty and he always had to take time to admire it, to measure its powerful weight in his hands. Then he cocked it, sending a bullet into the chamber, and aimed down the road in the direction the couple had taken.

They were gone.

Well, now. Well, he thought. He could feel a little flutter in his chest, a quickening of his pulse. They cud'na gotten far, they was just there, in plain sight, walkin' big as you please. But they weren't there now and he swore softly and leaped to the ground.

He started walking down the road, his rifle poised, ready to be brought to firing position instantly. He could hear the birds chapping in the brush at the side of the road, could hear the soft summer drone of insects. He paused, listened. Then he could hear it—twigs crackling, the rustle of dry leaves.

He walked to the edge of the lane and squinted his eyes, surveying the thick expanse of brush. The movement stopped, then started again. Stopped. He kept watching. Then he caught a glimpse of something red, something moving, and he realized it was the girl, the red of her jersey, and he concentrated on her movements. She was crawling on her hands and knees through the brush. He raised the rifle to his shoulder and sighted in on her.

From behind he heard the young man's voice: "All right, Alvin! Hold it!"

He relaxed his finger on the trigger but held the rifle steady. "Hey, now, boy! You ain't gonna tell me you got a

gun in your han', are you?"

"You move one muscle, old man, and I'll blow your damn head off!"

"Aw, hell, boy. You know that ain't no kind of trick to play on a old fox like me. You're bluffin', boy!"

"Try me!"

Alvin held the rifle steady.

"Drop it, damn you!"

"Hell, boy, that trick's as old as the—"

He whirled suddenly, swinging the rifle barrel around in a wide even arc. But before he could squeeze the trigger, the gun in the boy's hand popped off at him and all Alvin saw before he died was a bright splash of red, sudden and violent.

"How do you feel?" Dom said. He was sitting next to the girl and had put his arm around her.

"Shook. But I'll be okay."

"You took quite a chance. Giving him the come-on like that."

"I had to," she said. "I had to know—"

The State Police car pulled into the lane and parked in front of Alvin's body. Two troopers got out and looked down at Alvin's crumpled form. Then one of the troopers looked at Dom and said, "Well, DeLuca, was it close?"

"Too close," Dom DeLuca

said. "He almost had the girl. If I hadn't circled around and come out of the woods behind him when I did—"

"Damned if you weren't right," the second trooper said. "What made you so sure there was some guy picking up hitchhikers on this road?"

"It had to be this road," DeLuca said. "I managed to trace the person I was hired to find as far as Medford. Then nothing. The girl was with her boy friend, but both just disappeared. No word of them in Adington or any of the other towns along the line. When I checked at your barracks, I found out that you keep pretty tight wraps on hitchhiking on the expressway. The only other road out of town was this one. I figured if I put myself on it with a girl, sooner or later I'd find out what happened."

"We almost lost you when the old guy made the turnoff," the first trooper said. "If it hadn't been for that old truck burning oil the way it did, we'd have gone clear into Adington before we realized we'd lost you."

It took them an hour of searching in the woods until they found a suitable clearing. Then one of the troopers went back to Alvin's truck and got a shovel from under the canvas. A half hour later they uncovered the first of the bodies.



THE JURY BOX

by **JOHN DICKSON CARR**

This month, while encountering no worthy new item, your mentor has had the luck to unearth four paperbacks which fulfill every requirement. Today's paperbacks are as expensive as were hardcover novels in my youth, but with our present swollen prices the cost seems moderate by contrast. And, although classic detection is missing from the quartet, I can offer you incessant excitement either from espionage or from mystery-thriller.

The Confidential Agent, by Graham Greene (Pocket Books, \$1.50), is a cloak-and-dagger classic first published more than thirty-five years ago, but with its grip unweakened by time.

Though the author never tells us which side in what country's civil war is represented by a protagonist merely called D., we can soon guess. In England to buy coal from multi-millionaire Lord Benditch, hounded by peril at every step, D. soon becomes acquainted both with Lord Benditch's handsome daughter and with the loyal little drudge called Else.

D. soon wins our sympathy as he battles danger against vivid backgrounds: the sleazy hotel in Bloomsbury, the sinister office above Oxford Street, the mining town of the Midlands, and back to a fog-shrouded London where his enemies close in.

Frame succeeds frame; he can't seem to escape. When a last twist finds him safely homeward bound, with Rose Benditch beside him, the reader has been treated to an unforgettable experience in espionage and thrill.

Waking one morning at a Norwegian luxury hotel, Giles Denison, British protagonist of Desmond Bagley's *The Tightrope Men* (Fawcett, \$1.25), sees in his shaving mirror the face of a total stranger.

No, it's not science fiction. By practical means, for very practical reasons, he has been given the identity of Professor Harold Meyrick, a scientific genius much older than himself. Complications fly like poisoned darts. Denison's double life is governed by the double dealing of a hush-hush bureau from London, which

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must recover certain documents buried in Finland. And the real Meyrick has a daughter in whom Denison's interest becomes anything but paternal.

Conflicting forces collide through Scandinavia with mayhem and murder. What role has been played by Kidder, the loud-voiced American? Or by Carey, that enigmatic figure from Whitehall? By the time most questions have been answered, with the wry comment that injustice rules this world, we have lived through another cloak-and-dagger epic which no connoisseur should miss.

Though *The Dark Side of the Street*, by Jack Higgins (Fawcett, 95¢), belongs to mystery-thriller rather than espionage, it has espionage atmosphere like the ticking of a bomb.

Jack Higgins, whose last novel so powerfully portrayed strife-torn Ireland, here deals with a crime ring for arranging the escape of well-heeled malefactors from prison. But will the fugitive in fact find safety? Or does his escape lead only to betrayal and death?

Paul Chavasse, from Britain's Special Branch, must identify crime's master plotter, the Baron, and learn the truth of this escape route by following it. Thrust behind bars as cell-mate of a youthful mug named Youngblood, Chavasse breaks jail with his cell-mate under the tutelage of the Baron. Their trail twists north to the Baron's death-farm in Yorkshire, then oversea to the Channel Islands. Menace and violence are climaxed literally with a bang, in which the bad guys get their deserts and only Chavasse remains alive for our adventure's spectacular end.

With Lionel White's *The Mexico Run* (Fawcett, 95¢) we now leave British concerns for those of an American semi-hero challenging life, death, and fortune in some wickedly fast maneuvers south of the Rio Grande.

Mark Johns, not unsympathetic Vietnam veteran, won't touch any hard drugs. But he has no objection to buying and transporting Mexican marijuana for sale in his own country.

Round his neck, as he dodges to avoid the traps of Mexico's tricky Captain Morales, clings beautiful, blonde young Sharon, who has attached herself and won't let go. Mark has become rather fond of Sharon before she is brutally, senselessly slain by some unknown hand. At length, fleeing from Mexico with his old friend Angel Cortillo, he also escapes legal retribution in the carefully prepared surprise finish of a very satisfactory story.

a NEW Pierre Chambrun story by

HUGH PENTECOST

Pierre Chambrun is the manager of the Hotel Beaumont, the top luxury hotel in New York. The Beaumont is a complete city within a city, with its own restaurants, bars, and shops, its own hospital, communications system, and police force.

But, come to think of it, Chambrun is more than a hotel manager: he is the mayor of his own city; or if you visualize the Beaumont as a small kingdom, he is the monarch of all he surveys, the ruler of his own realm. And—its chief detective.

Here is one of Chambrun's best cases—"The Adventure of the Fabulous Ice Sculpture" . . .

CHAMBRUN AND THE MELTING SWAN

by HUGH PENTECOST

He was a terribly nice kid, which is public relations for the just out of Cornell, with a Beaumont. I discovered, after a degree in Hotel Management. couple of years of bracing my Pierre Chambrun, the legendary manager of the Beaumont, feet, that they weren't after my New York City's top luxury job. They were gunning for hotel, took him on. It was Chambrun himself. Only the very top spot would satisfy Chambrun's custom to give an their egos. They came and they opportunity to a recommended worked very hard and finally graduate from Cornell each they left, aware that Chambrun year. They always came in, was the Beaumont and permanent as the Rock of Gibraltar. bright, shiny, and eager, and in Ted Springer was different the early days of my working from most of them. He really for Chambrun I had the feeling wanted to learn. He was end- these kids were after my job,

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lessly curious, his questions were always to the point. If he had ambitions toward any particular job in the Beaumont he kept them politely hidden. He was, Chambrun mentioned to me after a few weeks, that rare commodity, a born hotel man. Young Mr. Springer looked as if he might stay with us for a long, long time. I think he would have if he had lived.

The security staff at the Beaumont consists of about 25 men and five girls under the efficient command of Jerry Dodd, a former F.B.I. agent, a wiry, energetic, and very tough little cop. Chambrun assigned Ted Springer to Jerry Dodd's force. It was the ideal post from which to see and learn everything that went on in the hotel, from the penthouses to the cellars. The Beaumont is like an isolated city within a city, with its own restaurants and bars, its shops, hospital, communications systems, police force, and mayor or city manager. We have all the problems of a city including the problem of crime.

About the time Ted Springer came to work for us we were in the throes of being victimized by a highly skillful hotel thief. There had been a rash of robberies in some of the best hotels in the city. The M.O. is simple: a knock on the door, a couple of thugs barge in, slug the un-

happy guest or guests, steal whatever isn't nailed down, and take off.

Nothing like that had happened to us. Jerry Dodd had some kind of personal, built-in radar system that could smell out the wrong kind of person on the premises. Our man was a much slicker operator. He never burglarized a room when anyone was in it. He had a way with locks. He seemed to know exactly when a guest was out and exactly which guests were worth robbing. This meant a very close and constant surveillance. It suggested that our man was a guest himself, probably smiling at us cheerfully as he passed us in the lobby.

Jerry Dodd had gone over the list of some 1200 guests and boiled down his list to six—five men and a woman. After three weeks of watching those six and having four more robberies pulled off right under his nose, Jerry had pointed the finger at one man. His name was Wilson McVey. He was an attractive man in his middle thirties, blond, rather mod in his style of dress, and said to be an art expert for a West Coast museum. I say "said to be," but it checked out. He was just that, with a first-class reputation on the coast. Jerry had nothing positive on him, but he was convinced.

"There are two things we can do," Jerry told Chambrun. We were in Chambrun's second-floor office, and Chambrun, short and stocky, with the brightest black eyes you've ever seen buried in deep pouches, was sitting at his carved Florentine desk, smoking an Egyptian cigarette and sipping a cup of the foul Turkish coffee he kept at all day.

"We can tell him his room is needed and kick him out," Chambrun said, "or we can wait to catch him redhanded and send him up for a long time."

"And risk another robbery," Jerry said.

"I want him. I want him badly," Chambrun said.

So Mr. McVey was in for it, I thought. Chambrun and Jerry would get him sooner or later.

Jerry had gone a good deal farther than trying to identify the thief. He had drawn up a list of the most likely victims for McVey, trying to think like McVey himself. On that list was a Mrs. Framingham on the fourteenth floor—1407. She was a middle-aged, not unattractive woman, alone, and clearly on the make. She wore valuable jewelry in public and as far as Jerry knew kept none of it in the hotel safe. Mrs. Framingham, out on the town, undoubtedly left most of her jewelry in

1407. There were others, but they are not important to this story. Men were assigned to cover each of the possibilities and Ted Springer, unluckily for him, drew Mrs. Framingham.

About 6:30 on the evening when it happened, Ted Springer checked in with Jerry. Mrs. Framingham had just left her room, dolled up for the evening.

"Stay under cover," Jerry ordered Springer. "If McVey—or anyone else—lets himself into the room, don't try to nab him. Call me. I want to take him myself."

Springer was a management student, not a cop. Caught, McVey might turn out to be dangerous and Jerry didn't want a green kid confronting him.

I was aware of the stakeout and I knew, as the evening wore on, that none of the men watching had reported any action on the part of Wilson McVey.

As public-relations director of the hotel I had other things to do beside stalking our hotel thief. On that particular night there had been a private banquet in one of the special dining rooms for the French Ambassador to the United Nations. It broke up a little before eleven and I made a point of putting myself in the Ambassador's path to inquire if every-

thing had been satisfactory.

"I'm Mark Haskell, sir," I told him. "Mr. Chambrun will be anxious to know how the dinner was."

It had been perfect, the Ambassador told me. The Beaumont's wine cellar is unsurpassed, particularly in imported French wines.

"There was one small disappointment, however," the Ambassador said. "My old friend Jacques Dubois had promised one of his fabulous ice sculptures as a table decoration. He never brought it. I know he's a temperamental devil, so I can only assume I must have offended him in some fashion."

I told the Ambassador I didn't think that was likely. Only that afternoon Jacques had told me, with pride, that he was preparing something very special for the Ambassador. I would try to find out what had gone wrong.

Jacques Dubois, in his late fifties, is the pastry chef at the Beaumont. He is a flamboyant and volatile Frenchman. More than that, he is a personal friend of Chambrun's. Back in the 1940s they had fought, side by side, in the French Resistance. It was hard for me to imagine Jacques Dubois, whom I'd never seen except in his white clothes and chef's hat, strangling Nazis in a Paris

alley; but Chambrun remembered him as a man of courage, and was fond of him.

As a sideline to his chef's duties Jacques Dubois had become an expert in the almost forgotten art of ice carving. From a 300-pound block of ice he could carve a battleship, a bird, a rabbit, a deer, or any kind of special figure required by the customer. What a sculptor could do with stone Jacques could do with ice, and he was enormously proud of his product. I suspected that the Ambassador might also have been one of the old Resistance group and I wondered why Jacques had let him down.

I had nothing else pressing to do, so I went down to the kitchens to see if Jacques was still there. No one had seen him since about seven o'clock when he had gone to deliver an ice sculpture for the Ambassador's dinner.

Puzzled, I decided to go down to the basement where Jacques did his carving. The area consists of a small outer room backed by a large walk-in freezer like a butcher's shop's. The first thing I saw, resting on what looked like a butcher's carving block, was a slightly drooping swan carved out of ice. It must have stood where it was in the outer warmish room for some time because there was a

pool of water under the block and on the surrounding floor.

On the block beside the melting swan were some of Jacques' equipment—a carpenter's wooden yardstick, a piece of graph paper with the design of the swan drawn on its squares, a six-pronged ice shaver, and a V-shaped chisel. Jacques is usually as careful with his tools as a diamond cutter. It was out of character for him to leave them lying around even if he had taken off in a temperamental pique.

I felt suddenly that something was wrong. I turned to the freezer, anticipating the chill, and walked in. The first room inside is kept at just below 32°. That is where Jacques, wearing a sheepskin-lined coat, does his carving. In the back room Jacques keeps his 300-pound blocks of ice, and the temperature there is kept at 5° Fahrenheit.

That's where I found Jacques, frozen rock-solid.

I took him by the heels and dragged him out, through the first room and out onto the floor beside the melting swan. I think I knew he was dead, but I found myself running around looking for something to cover him. Finally I made sense and called Dr. Partridge, the house physician, Chambrun in his penthouse, and Jerry Dodd.

Then I knelt beside the frozen man, rubbing a hand that was a block of ice, hoping inanely that it might do some good.

Chambrun, Jerry, and the old doctor arrived almost simultaneously, the doctor grumbling over having been dragged away from a backgammon game in the Spartan Bar. Chambrun, his eyes glittering slits in their pouches, Jerry, and I watched the doctor make his preliminary examination. Finally the old man stood up, muttering about his arthritic knees.

"No use," he said. "He's long gone, Pierre."

Chambrun seemed almost not to be listening. He had picked up the carpenter's yardstick and was idly measuring the swan's delicately curved neck.

"Terrible thing for a man to get locked in his own freezer," Doc Partridge said.

"Nonsense!" It was like an explosion from Chambrun. "There are no locks, just to make certain such a thing is impossible. There's no way to get locked in. Could he have had a heart attack and frozen after he died?"

"It's slippery in there," Jerry said. "He could have fallen, hit his head, and frozen before he came to."

"I want the answers, Doctor," Chambrun said. "Was it his heart? Was he knocked uncon-

scious by a fall—or by someone?”

“Have to thaw him out first,” Doc said.

The doctor had called for a stretcher on his way down. It should have arrived by now. We heard someone pounding on the door of the service elevator.

“This thing is stuck about a foot from floor level,” someone shouted at us. “Can’t open the door. We’ll have to go up a flight and bring the stretcher down the stairs.”

“So move it!” Jerry shouted back.

A friend could die, a mistress could be clamoring for him, but if something didn’t work properly in his beloved hotel, Chambrun stayed with it till he had an answer. He sent for the chief engineer. While Jacques’s body was carried upstairs by the stretcher bearers, the engineer worked on the elevator.

A few minutes later we knew the grim reason why the elevator couldn’t get down to the floor level. The horribly mangled body of young Ted Springer lay at the bottom of the shaft.

Lieutenant Hardy of Manhattan’s Homicide Division was an old friend. As in any city, there had been murders before this in the city called Beaumont. Hardy was a big

fair-haired man who looked more like a bewildered Notre Dame fullback than a sharp criminal investigator. Hardy’s chief attribute is a kind of dogged stick-to-itiveness. He digs and digs and digs until he finally comes up with something that makes sense. He was on the scene at midnight, an hour after I’d found Jacques’ body in the freezer and we’d found what was left of Ted Springer.

Hardy began at the bottom of the service-elevator shaft. Chambrun and I had stayed there from the moment Ted’s body was found. Jerry Dodd, a white-hot rage shaking him, had gone in search of Mr. Wilson McVey. Jerry had no doubts about what had happened.

Ted had confronted McVey outside Mrs. Framingham’s room on the fourteenth floor—or in it—had been overpowered by McVey and dropped down the elevator shaft. The service-elevator door on the fourteenth floor had been tampered with, Jerry found. McVey, if it was McVey, was an expert with locks and catches. He had sent the elevator up above fourteen, gimmicked the door catch on fourteen, and dropped Ted—alive or dead—down the shaft.

Hardy, examining Ted’s body

without moving it, was able to set a time for us. Ted's wrist watch had been smashed in the fall and had stopped at exactly 9:07.

Jerry Dodd, cruising about the hotel, came on Mr. Wilson McVey having a drink in the Trapeze Bar which is located on the mezzanine just over the Beaumont's lobby. That was at 12:30 A.M. McVey was entertaining an attractive lady. He regarded Jerry with a pleasantly insolent smile. Jerry said afterward he could have sworn McVey knew exactly what was coming and was particularly pleased because he knew he had the right answer.

Jerry got McVey away from his table and the lady and talked to him over by the bar. He identified himself and asked McVey where he had been that evening from eight o'clock on. McVey could have refused to answer—Jerry had no legal right to interrogate him.

"I don't know why you're asking me, Mr. Dodd, or by what right you ask me," McVey said, smiling, "but I have no objection to telling you. I work for an art museum on the West Coast. Tonight I attended an auction of paintings at the McIntyre Gallery on West 57th Street. I was there from eight o'clock until about eleven thirty. The young lady at my

table was with me all that time. If her word won't do, the gallery can verify it. I bought several paintings for my museum in the course of the evening."

It checked out. Like it or not, Wilson McVey had been nowhere near the fourteenth floor at 9:07. There was too much evidence to prove that the fourteenth floor was the starting point of Ted's fall. Not only had the catch on the elevator door been tampered with, but Hardy found signs that Ted's body had been dragged along the corridor from close by Mrs. Framingham's room to the back-hall area where the service-elevator ran. McVey was a blind alley, a dead end.

"Whoever our man is, Ted moved too fast and showed himself. This kind of operator doesn't turn to violence as a rule." Jerry Dodd was expounding to us in Chambrun's office in short bursts of anger. He had been certain he had cornered a thief and a murderer, and now he was at the beginning of the line again. Chambrun sat at his desk, his eyes almost closed, sipping his Turkish coffee. I'd made myself a double Jack Daniels on the rocks. I needed it. We were all under the surveillance of the three-cornered face in the blue Picasso original opposite Chambrun's desk.

"Ted showed himself too soon," Jerry went on. "He shouldn't have showed himself at all. He should have called me. Our thief knew the game was up. Ted could identify him, name him. So he turned to violence, knocked Ted out, and dropped him down the shaft. We'll never know what he hit Ted with or in what other way he overpowered him. Too much damage in the fall."

Chambrun opened his eyes. "Don't let McVey slip away from you, Jerry. I'm not satisfied."

"He couldn't have done it," Jerry said.

"Done what?" Chambrun asked in a strangely vague voice.

"Whatever was done. He wasn't here."

"He wasn't here at seven minutes past nine," Chambrun said.

"Which is when it happened."

"I wonder," Chambrun said.

Hardy had come into the room during this conversation. "No doubt about the time," he said. "The watch."

"You have the watch?" Chambrun asked.

"Of course."

"Fingerprints—if they aren't all yours?"

Hardy's face looked stern. "I don't think we've checked yet. You think—?"

"That's what I think," Chambrun said.

"I wish I knew what the hell you were talking about," I said.

Nobody answered me because old Doc Partridge joined us at that point. "I've got a rather surprising answer for you, Pierre," he said.

"It wasn't his heart," Chambrun said. He was suddenly talking about Jacques Dubois.

"He was heavily dosed with chloroform," Dr. Partridge said. "Probably held over his face on a cloth or handkerchief. It was enough to have made him unconscious for a long time and it possibly killed him. The Medical Examiner isn't certain. The chloroform could have killed him in about thirty minutes. In that five-degree temperature he couldn't have lasted more than three hours. In any event, the chloroform is why he didn't get out of the freezer."

"Is the chloroform easily detectable?" Chambrun asked.

"Simple."

Chambrun turned to Hardy. "Have your people check with what's left of young Springer, Lieutenant. It's just possible the same M.O. was used."

Hardy took off. Chambrun turned to Jerry Dodd. "I think you'd better bring Mr. Wilson McVey up here. I don't want him out of my sight."

"Suppose he won't come?"

"Then I'll go to him," Chambrun said.

Jerry left to find McVey. Chambrun lit one of his flat Egyptian cigarettes and squinted at me through the smoke.

"If a strange man came up to you in a bar and asked you for an alibi, would you give it to him, Mark?"

"I'd tell him to drop dead," I said.

"Unless you very much wanted to provide an alibi for yourself for a certain time," Chambrun said. "You asked me a little while ago what I was talking about. It's not very complicated. Ted Springer's watch was set to seven minutes past nine after he was dead. Because that *wasn't* the time he died."

"It could have been set before he was thrown down the shaft," I said.

"No," Chambrun said. "If it had been, the Ambassador would have had his frozen swan to decorate the banquet table. Have you forgotten that my poor friend Jacques was also murdered? I will make you a bet, Mark. I will bet you a new suit of your choice, price no object, that Ted Springer was murdered a few minutes *before* seven o'clock, and that Jacques was murdered at almost *exactly* seven o'clock."

"You got a witness or something?" I asked. I thought I was being funny.

"I have a witness or something," Chambrun said, quite seriously.

After that he seemed to go into some kind of trance. I've seen him that way before when he's trying to think something through. I paced around the office, after pouring myself another drink, waiting for some word from Hardy and Jerry on the subject of Mr. Wilson McVey. You could have feathered me down when the office door opened and Jerry appeared with a smiling McVey.

"I ought to be outraged by whatever is going on here, Mr. Chambrun," McVey said. "I am asked for an alibi. I am ordered to come up here to your office. I should have refused both requests, but curiosity has got the better of me. What is it all about?"

He was as relaxed as a man in church.

"There have been two murders committed in the hotel tonight, Mr. McVey," Chambrun said.

"Shocking. But what has that to do with me? I wasn't in your hotel when the crimes were committed."

"How do you know that?" Chambrun asked.

McVey's smile was com-

pletely disarming. "Because your Mr. Dodd asked me where I was from eight o'clock on. Obviously your murders happened then or I would have been asked to account for some other time."

"So I ask you now to account for the time between a quarter to seven and a quarter after seven," Chambrun said.

I thought for just a flashing second McVey's smile seemed to fade. But he stayed with it.

"I was dressing to go out for the evening," he said.

"In your room?"

"Yes."

"You can prove it?"

"How? I was alone. I don't dress in public, Mr. Chambrun." McVey reached in his pocket for a cigarette and lit it with a lighter held in a perfectly steady hand.

The little red button on Chambrun's desk phone blinked. He answered. Of course we only heard his end of it. "Chambrun here . . . Ah, yes, Lieutenant . . . Interesting coincidence, what? . . . Ah, well, life is full of little disappointments. I think you'd better get back here. I've got your man."

Chambrun put down the phone and his glittering black eyes fixed on McVey. "The two dead men were friends of mine, McVey—trusted friends. It is going to give me pleasure to

nail you to the barn door."

"Fascinating if improbable," McVey said, still smiling.

"You're a clever operator, McVey, but tonight the heat got a little too much for you." Chambrun's mouth moved in a tight smile of his own. "The heat got too hot for you, but I should add it was the cold that did you in."

"What kind of double talk is that?" McVey asked.

"It will save time if I lay it out for you," Chambrun said. "You are a skillful hotel thief, McVey. You've been driving us crazy here for weeks. But tonight we were close to you. We'd begun to think your way and we guessed you might be planning to rob a certain Mrs. Framingham. A young man on our security force named Springer was waiting for you on the fourteenth floor. We found him at about eleven o'clock at the bottom of the service-elevator shaft. His watch had been broken in the fall at seven minutes past nine."

"Which would seem to let me out," McVey said, still at ease.

"Lieutenant Hardy has just told me on the phone that Springer had been chloroformed before he fell. I suggest you carry chloroform with you on your little adventures, McVey. You're not a violent man, until

you are driven to it. You carry the chloroform in case someone walks in on you, unexpected. You were masked or disguised, I suppose. A whiff of chloroform and there would be time for you to get away."

"And have other people been chloroformed in your robberies, Mr. Chambrun?"

"No, because you had no need to use it until young Springer walked in on you tonight. He recognized you, called you by name, didn't he? You knew he had you and so you chloroformed him, dragged him to the service elevator, unlocked the door with your special skills, and dropped him down the shaft. That was at a few minutes *before* seven."

"Prove that it was me. Prove that it was at the time you say." McVey moistened his lips. Strain was beginning to show. "You said Springer's watch was set at seven minutes past nine."

"Exactly the right way to put it," Chambrun said. "'Was set' at seven minutes past nine. Proof of the time and proof that it was you are coming up, McVey. You must have come as close to panic as you have ever been. You had to be as sure as you could be that Springer had died in the fall. So down you go in the service elevator to the floor above the bottom. You walk the last flight, use your

skills to open the basement door to the elevator shaft, and there was Springer—as dead as you could hope. Then you saw the chance to put the icing on the cake. You took Springer's watch off his wrist, set it at seven minutes past nine, then smashed it and strapped it back on his wrist."

McVey actually laughed. "And you have proof of all this?"

"Let me go on, McVey," Chambrun said. "Just as you had the watch back on Springer's wrist you heard a sound behind you. You turned and saw Jacques Dubois standing beside his beautiful ice carving of a swan. He had wheeled it out of the freezer while you were concentrating on Springer. You had no choice. You pretended to be explaining while you walked up to him—then a second dose of chloroform. You dragged Jacques into the freezer and left him there to die.

"As I have said, this was at about seven o'clock. How do I know the time? Because I know about everything that goes on in my hotel, McVey. I know many facts about ice carving from my friend Dubois. For example, I know that when a carving melts, its relative shape is retained because all parts melt in proportion. Ice ac-

tually melts at a rate of about half an inch an hour at room temperature." Chambrun turned to me. "Do you remember, Mark, when we first found Jacques I was measuring the swan's neck with that carpenter's yardstick?"

I remembered.

"The design on the graph paper showed me that the swan's neck had originally been four inches thick. My measuring showed me, at eleven o'clock, that it was then only two inches thick. So I knew that the swan had been out of the freezer for approximately four hours—half an inch to an hour. That's when poor Jacques was taken back into the freezer by you, McVey—at seven o'clock."

"So I need an alibi for then."

"Not really," Chambrun said. "Your fingerprints on the watch—"

McVey seemed, slowly, to shrivel before our eyes. Like the melting swan, I thought. "Never improvise," he said in a shaken voice. "I always planned everything down to the smallest detail, every eventuality.

But as you said, Mr. Chambrun, it all happened too fast—the heat was too hot—one thing on top of the other. I had never killed anyone in my life, and there in the space of twenty minutes—"

Jerry took McVey away and Chambrun went over to the sideboard to pour himself a brandy. He looked tired.

"It's amazing that you could tell time by that swan," I said. "If you hadn't measured it when we first found it—"

"But I did."

"Anyway, the fingerprints would have nailed him."

Chambrun sniffed the aroma of his brandy. "What fingerprints?" he asked.

"On the watch."

"The only fingerprints on the watch are Hardy's," Chambrun said. "He told me that on the phone and I said 'Ah, well, life is full of little disappointments.'"

"You let McVey think—"

"He killed two friends of mine in cold blood," Chambrun said. "Are there Marquis of Queensberry rules for dealing with such a man?"

"Q"

KILL NOW — PAY LATER

by REX STOUT

(continued from page 42)

The doorbell rang. I got up and detoured around the yellow chairs to the hall, and switched on the stoop light. There facing me, his blunt nose almost touching the glass, was Inspector Cramer. From the expression on his big round red face he hadn't come to bring the million dollars.

It was sometimes necessary, when we had company, to use an alias when announcing a caller who might or might not be welcome, and any name with two Ds in it meant Cramer. I stepped into the office and said, "Mr. Judd."

"Ah?" Wolfe cocked his head at me. "Indeed." His brows went up. He turned to the company. "It's a question. Mr. Cramer of the police is at the door. Shall we have him join us? What do you think?"

They just looked. Not a word.

"I think not," Wolfe said, "unless you want him." He pushed his chair back and rose. "You will excuse me." He headed for the door. I stepped aside to let him by and followed him to the front. He slipped the bolt in, opened the door the two

inches the chain would allow, and spoke through the crack. "I'm busy, Mr. Cramer, and I don't know when I'll be free. Miss Frances Cox, Mr. John Mercer, and Mr. Philip Horan are with me. I came to tell you instead of sending Mr. Goodwin because it seemed—"

"Open the door!"

"No. I wouldn't object to your presence while I talk with these people, but you would—"

"I want to see Elma Vassos. Open the door."

"That's it." Wolfe turned his head, and so did I, at a noise from behind. Philip Horan's head was sticking out at the office door. Wolfe turned back to the crack. "That's the point. Miss Vassos will not see you. As I have said before, a citizen's rights vis-à-vis an officer of the law are anomalous and nonsensical. I can refuse to let you into my house, but once I admit you I am helpless. You can roam about at will. You can speak to anyone you choose. I dare not touch you. If I order you to leave you can ignore me. If I call in a policeman to expel an intruder I am

laughed at. So I don't admit you—unless you have a warrant?"

"You know damn well I haven't. Elma Vassos has filed a complaint against me at your instigation and I'm going to discuss it with her."

"Discuss it with her attorney."

"Bah. Nat Parker. You call the tune and he plays it. Are you going to open this door?"

"No."

"By God, I *will* get a warrant."

"On what ground? I advise you to watch the wording. You can't claim the right to enter my house in search of evidence. Evidence of what? You can't charge an attempt to obstruct justice; if you say I am hindering an official investigation, I ask what investigation? Not of the death of Dennis Ashby; from the published accounts and from what you said to Mr. Goodwin yesterday morning, I understand that case is closed. As for a warrant to search my house for Miss Vassos, that's absurd. In your official capacity you can assert no right to see her or touch her. She has violated no law by bringing a civil action against you. I advise—"

"She's a material witness."

"Indeed. In what matter? The People of the State of New York versus Peter Vassos for

the murder of Dennis Ashby? Pfui. Peter Vassos is dead. Or have you abandoned that theory? Do you now think that the one who killed Ashby is still alive? If so, who are the suspects and how can Miss Vassos be a material witness against one or more of them? No, Mr. Cramer; it's no good; I'm busy; the cold air rushes through this crack; I'm shutting the door."

"Wait a minute. You know damn well she can't get me for damages."

"Perhaps not. But there's a good chance she can get you put under oath and asked who told you that she had improper relations with Dennis Ashby. Mr. Goodwin asked you that yesterday and you were amused. Offensively. Will you tell me now, not for quotation?"

"No. You know I won't. Are you saying she didn't? That Vassos didn't kill Ashby?"

"Certainly. That's why I got those people here. That's what I'm going to discuss with them. The actions brought—"

"Damn it, Wolfe, open the door!"

"I'm shutting it. If you change your mind about answering my question, you know my phone number."

Cramer has his points. Knowing that it would be silly to try to stop the door with his foot,

since Wolfe and I together weigh 450 pounds, he didn't. Knowing that if he stood there and shook his fist and made faces we would see him through the one-way glass, he didn't. He turned and went.

Wolfe and I about-faced. Horan was no longer peeking; he had stepped into the hall and was standing there. As we approached he turned and moved inside, and as we entered the office he was speaking.

"It was Inspector Cramer. Wolfe shut the door on him. He's gone."

Frances Cox said, loud, "You don't shut the door on a Police Inspector."

"Wolfe did." Horan was back in his chair. Wolfe and I went to ours. Wolfe focused on Horan.

"To resume. Did Peter Vassos ever shine your shoes?"

Horan's quick-moving eyes darted to Mercer, but the president was frowning at a corner of Wolfe's desk and didn't meet them. They went back to Wolfe.

"No, he didn't. I suppose what you're getting at is did I tell Vassos about Ashby and his daughter? I didn't. I have never seen Vassos. I understand he always came around ten thirty, and I am never there at that time. I'm out calling on customers. I was there Monday

morning and was with Ashby a few minutes, but I left before ten o'clock."

Wolfe grunted. "Your observed presence there Monday morning is immaterial. Anyone could have got into Ashby's room unobserved by the door from the hall, including you. I'm not after—"

"Then why pick on us, if *anyone* could have got in?"

"I have two reasons: a weaker one, the attack on Miss Vassos' character, and a stronger one, which I reserve. I'm not after who told Vassos about Ashby and his daughter; I don't think anybody did; I'm after who told the police. Did you?"

"I answered their questions. I had to."

"You know better than that if you're not a nincompoop. You did not have to. Telling them even about yourself and your movements was at your discretion; certainly you were under no compulsion to jabber about others. Did you?"

"I don't jabber. What I told the police is on record. Ask them."

"I have. You just heard me ask Mr. Cramer. You have more than once asked a female employee of your firm to find out about the relations between Mr. Ashby and Miss Vassos. What did she tell you?"

"Ask her."

"I'm asking you."

"Ask her."

"I hope I won't have to." Wolfe's eyes went right. "Miss Cox. What terms were you on with Mr. Vassos?"

"I wasn't on any terms with him." Her head was up and her chin was pushing. It was a nice chin when she left it to itself. "He was the bootblack."

"He was also the father of one of your fellow employees. Of course you knew that."

"Certainly."

"Did you like him? Did he like you?"

"I never asked him. I didn't like him or dislike him. He was the bootblack, that's all."

"Affable exchanges even with a bootblack are not unheard of. Did you speak much with him?"

"No. Hardly any."

"Describe the customary routine. He would appear in the anteroom where you were stationed, and then?"

"He would ask me if it was all right to go in. He always went to Mr. Mercer's room first. If someone was in with Mr. Mercer, it depended on who it was. Sometimes he wouldn't want to be disturbed, and Pete would go to Mr. Busch first. Mr. Busch's room is across the hall from Mr. Mercer's."

"Are the two doors directly opposite?"

"No. Mr. Mercer's door comes first on the left. Mr. Busch's door is nearly at the end of the hall on the right."

"After he had finished with Mr. Mercer and Mr. Busch, Mr. Vassos would go to Mr. Ashby?"

"Yes, but that took him past the reception room and he would ask me on his way. If Mr. Ashby had an important customer with him he wouldn't want Pete butting in."

"Are there any others in that office whom Mr. Vassos served?"

"No."

"Never?"

"No."

"Was the routine followed on Monday morning?"

"Yes, as far as I know. When Pete came there was no one in with Mr. Mercer and he went on in. Then later he came and put his head around the corner and I nodded, and he went on to Mr. Ashby's room."

"How much later?"

"About fifteen minutes."

"Did you see him enter at Mr. Ashby's door?"

"No, it's down the other hall. Anyway, I couldn't see him enter any of the doors because my desk is in a corner of the reception room."

"What time was it when he put his head around the corner and you nodded him on to Mr. Ashby's room?"

"It was ten minutes to eleven, or maybe eight or nine minutes. The police wanted to know exactly, but that's as close as I could come."

"How close could you come to the truth about Mr. Ashby and Miss Vassos?"

It took her off balance, but only for two seconds, and she kept her eyes at him. She raised her voice a little. "You think that's clever, don't you?"

"No. I'm not clever, Miss Cox. I'm either more or less than clever. What did you tell the police about Mr. Ashby and Miss Vassos?"

"I say what Mr. Horan said. Ask them."

"What did you tell them about Mr. Ashby and yourself? Did you tell them that you and he were intimate? Did you tell them that Mrs. Ashby once asked an officer of the corporation to discharge you because you were a bad influence on her husband?"

She was smiling, a corner of her mouth turned up. "That sounds like Andy Busch," she said. "You don't care who you listen to, do you, Mr. Wolfe? Maybe you're less than clever."

"But I'm persistent, madam. The police let up on you because they thought their problem was solved; I don't, and I won't. I shall harass you, if necessary, beyond the limit of

endurance. You can make it easier for both of us by telling me now of your personal relations with Mr. Ashby. Will you?"

"There's nothing to tell."

"There will be." Wolfe left her. He swiveled to face John Mercer in the red leather chair. "Now, sir, I applaud your forbearance. You must have been tempted a dozen times to interrupt and you didn't. Commendable. As I told you, the only way to stop me would be to satisfy me that I'm mistaken, and Mr. Horan and Miss Cox have made no progress. I invite you to try. Instead of firing questions at you—you know what they would be—I'll listen. Go ahead."

When Mercer had finished his study of the corner of Wolfe's desk he had turned his attention not to Wolfe, but to his salesman and receptionist. He had kept his eyes on Horan while Wolfe was questioning him, and then on Miss Cox, and, since I had him full-face past the profiles of the other two, I didn't have to be more than clever to tell that his immediate worry wasn't how to satisfy Wolfe but how to satisfy himself. And from his eyes when he moved them to Wolfe, he still wasn't sure. He spoke.

"I want to state that I shouldn't have said that my at-

torney thinks this is a black-mailing trick. I want to retract that. I admit it's possible that Miss Vassos has persuaded you—that you believe she has been slandered and you're acting in good faith."

Wolfe said, "Ummf."

Mercer screwed his lips. He still wasn't sure. He unscrewed them. "Of course," he said, "if it's just a trick, nothing will satisfy you. But if it isn't, then the truth ought to. I'm going to disregard my attorney's advice and tell you exactly what happened. It seems to me—"

Two voices interrupted him. Horan said, "No!" emphatically, and Miss Cox said, "Don't, Mr. Mercer!"

He ignored them. "It seems to me that's the best thing to do to stop this—this publicity. I told the police about Miss Vassos'—uh—her association with Mr. Ashby, and Mr. Horan and Miss Cox corroborated it. All three of us told them. It wasn't slander. You may be right that we weren't legally *compelled* to tell them, but they were investigating a murder, and we regarded it as our duty to answer their questions. According to my attorney, if you go on with it and the case gets to court, it will be dismissed."

Wolfe's palms were flat on his desk. "Let's make it explicit. You told the police that

Miss Vassos had been seduced by Mr. Ashby?"

"Yes."

"How did you know that? I assume that you hadn't actually witnessed the performance."

"No. I asked him. There had been complaints about his conduct with some of the employees, and I had been told specifically about Miss Vassos."

"Told by whom?"

"Mr. Horan and Miss Cox."

"Who had told them?"

"Ashby himself had told Miss Cox. Horan wouldn't say where he had got his information."

"And you went to Ashby and he admitted it?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Last week. Wednesday. A week ago yesterday."

Wolfe closed his eyes and took in air, through his nose, all the way down, and let it out through his mouth. He had got more than he had bargained for. No wonder the cops and the D.A. had bought it. He took on another load of air, held it a second, let it go, and opened his eyes. "Do you confirm that, Miss Cox? That Ashby himself told you he had seduced Miss Vassos?"

"Yes."

"Who told you, Mr. Horan?"

Horan shook his head. "Nothing doing. I didn't tell the

police and I won't tell you. I'm not going to drag anyone else into this mess."

"Then you didn't regard it as your duty to answer *all* their questions."

"No."

Wolfe looked at Mercer. "I must consult Miss Vassos and her attorney. I shall advise her either to withdraw her action, or to pursue it and also to prefer a criminal charge against you three, conspiracy to defame her character—whatever the legal phrase may be. At the moment I don't know which I shall advise."

He pushed back his chair and arose. "You will be informed, probably by her attorney through yours. Meanwhile—"

"But I've told you the *truth*!"

"I don't deny the possibility. Meanwhile, I am not clear about the plan of your premises, and I need to be. I want Mr. Goodwin to inspect them. I wish to discuss the situation with him first, and it is near the dinner hour. He'll go after dinner, say at nine o'clock. I presume the door will be locked, so you will please arrange for someone to be there to let him in."

"Why? What good will that do? You said yourself that anyone could have got into Ashby's room by the other door."

"It's necessary if I am to be

satisfied. I need to understand clearly all the observable movements of people—particularly of Mr. Vassos. Say nine o'clock?"

Mercer didn't like it, but he wouldn't have liked anything short of an assurance that the heat was off or soon would be. The others didn't like it either, so they had to lump it. It was agreed that one of them would meet me in the lobby of the Eighth Avenue building at nine o'clock.

They left together, Miss Cox with her chin up, Mercer with his down, and Horan with his long bony face even longer. When I returned to the office after letting them out, Wolfe was still standing, scowling at the red leather chair as if Mercer were still in it.

I said emphatically, "Nuts. Mercer and Miss Cox are both quoting a dead man, and Horan's quoting Anonymous. They're all double-breasted liars. I now call her Elma. If she passes Busch up I'll probably put in a bid myself after I find out if she can dance."

Wolfe grunted. "Innocence has no contract with bliss. Confound it, of course she's innocent, that's the devil of it. If she had misbehaved as charged, and as a result her father had killed that man and then himself, she wouldn't have dared to

come to me unless she's a lunatic. There is always that possibility. Is she deranged?"

"No. She's a fine sweet pure fairly bright girl with a special face and good legs."

"Where is she?"

"In her room."

"I'm not in a mood to sit at the table with her. Tell Fritz to take up a tray."

"I'll take it up myself, and one for me. She'll want to know how you made out with them. After all, we've got her dollar."

Every trade has its tricks. If he's any good a detective gets habits as he goes along that become automatic, one of them being to keep his eyes peeled. As I turned the corner of Eighth Avenue at 8:56 that Thursday evening I wasn't conscious of the fact that I was casing the neighborhood; as I say, it gets automatic; but when my eye told me that there was something familiar about a woman standing at the curb across the avenue I took notice.

Right; it was Frances Cox in her gray wool coat and gray fur stole, and she had seen me. As I stopped in front of the building I was bound for, she beckoned and I crossed over to her. As I got there she spoke.

"There's a light in Ashby's room."

I rubbernecked and saw the

two lit windows on the tenth floor. "The cleaners," I said.

"No. They start at the top and they're through on that floor by seven thirty."

"Inspector Cramer. He's short a clue. Have you got a key?"

"Of course. I came to let you in. Mr. Mercer and Mr. Horan are busy."

"With the lawyer?"

"Ask them."

"The trouble with you is you blab. Okay, let's go up and help Cramer."

We crossed the avenue and entered. It was an old building and the lobby looked it, and so did the night man sprawled in a chair, yawning. He gave Miss Cox a nod as we entered the elevator, and on the way up she asked the operator if he had taken anyone to the tenth floor and he said no. When we got out she pointed to a door across the hall to the left and said, "That's Ashby's room."

There were two doors in range across the hall, the one she had pointed to, six paces to the left, and one six paces to the right with the number 1018 and below it MERCER'S BOBBINS, INC., and below that ENTRANCE. I asked if that was the reception room, and she said yes.

"This takes generalship," I said. "If we both go through the reception room and around, he hears us and ducks out this

way. This door can be opened from the inside?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll stick here. Maybe you'd better get the elevator man to go in and around with you. He might get tough."

"I can take care of myself. But I'm not taking orders from you."

"Okay, I'll get the elevator man."

"No." Her chin was stiff again—too bad, for it was a nice chin. She moved. As she headed for the door to the right I told her back, not loud, "Don't try to stalk him. Let your heels tap."

As I went to the door on the left and put my back to the wall, near its edge that would open, I was regretting that I had disregarded one of my personal rules, made some years back when I had spent a month in a hospital, that I would never go on an errand connected with a murder case without having a gun along. When you're just standing and listening, your mind skips around.

For instance: what if Ashby had been in with a narcotics ring, and he kept bobbins full of heroin in the files in his room, and one or more of his colleagues had come Monday and bumped him, and they had come back to look for bobbins,

and they now emerged with hardware?

Or, for instance: what if a competitor, knowing that Ashby was responsible for Mercer's Bobbins taking over his customers, had got desperate and decided to put an end—

The door opened, and the opener, not seeing me, was coming out backward, pulling the door shut, easy. I put my hand in the small of his back and pushed him back in, not too easy, and followed him. He stumbled but managed to recover without going down. Frances Cox's voice came. "Oh, it's you!"

I spoke. "This is getting monotonous, Mr. Busch. A door opens, and there you are. Are you surprising me, or am I surprising you?"

"You dirty double-crosser," Andrew Busch said. "I can't handle you, I know that, I found that out. I wish to God I could, and Nero Wolfe too. You lousy rat." He started for the door, not the one to the outer hall, the one where Miss Cox was standing.

"Wrong number," I said. "I didn't know who I was shoving. We don't owe you anything; we're working for Elma Vassos." He had turned and I had approached. "As for my being with Miss Cox, I wanted to have a look around and some-

one had to let me in. That's why I'm here. As I asked you once before, why are you here?"

"Go to hell. I think you're a damn liar and a rat."

"You're wrong, but I can't right you now. Of course you were looking for something, and if you found it I want to know what it is. I'm going over you. As you say, you can't handle me, but that's no disgrace. I'm bigger and stronger, and you're an office manager and I'm a pro. Stand still, please." I moved behind him.

I frisked him. Since he hadn't been expecting visitors it wasn't necessary to have him take off his shoes, but I made sure that he had no paper or other object on him that he might have found in that room. He didn't. Miss Cox had moved away from the door and stood and watched, saying nothing. Busch stood stiff, stiff as stone.

When I stepped back and said, "Okay, I guess you hadn't found it," he walked to the door, the inner one, and on out, without a word.

I looked around. Everything seemed to be in order; not even a drawer or a file was standing open. It was an ordinary executive office, nothing special, except that most of one wall was lined with filing cabinets. There was no hunk of polished petrified wood on the desk; it

was probably still at the police laboratory.

I went to the door Busch had left by, crossed the sill, turned right, stepped nine paces to a door on the right, turned through it, and was in the reception room. Miss Cox was at my heels. Facing me was the door to the outer hall with MERCER'S BOBBINS, INC. on it. To the right of it were chairs. The wall on the left was lined with shelves displaying Mercer's Bobbins products. Near the corner at the right were a desk and a switchboard. On the chair nearest the door was Andrew Busch, sitting straight and stiff, his palms on his knees.

"I'm an officer of this corporation," he said. "I belong here. You don't."

I couldn't dispute that, so I ignored it and turned to Miss Cox. "That's your desk?"

"Yes."

"Where are Mercer's and Busch's rooms?"

She showed me, and I went for a look. It was like this: when you entered the reception room from the outer hall, the desk and switchboard were near the far left corner, and at the far right corner was the door into the inner hall. Passing through that door, if you turned left you went down a short stretch of hall with only

one door in it, Ashbys, on the left; if you went straight ahead you were in a longer hall with a window at the end, and you came to Mercer's door first, on the left, and then Busch's door farther on, on the right. So, as Miss Cox had said, she could see none of the doors from her desk.

Another habit a detective forms is looking in drawers and cupboards and closets, on the principle that you sometimes find things you're not even looking for, and I would have pottered around a little in Mercer's and Busch's rooms, and Ashby's too, if Miss Cox hadn't been tagging along. I made a rough plan of the layout on a sheet of paper she furnished on request, folded it and put it in my pocket, and went to the chair where I had put my hat and coat.

"Just a minute," Andrew Busch said. He stood up. "Now *I'm going to search you.*"

"I'll be damned. You are?"

"I am. If you're taking something I want to know what it is."

"Good for you." I dropped my coat on the chair. "I'll make a deal. Tell me what you were after in Ashby's room and I'll let you finger me if you don't tickle."

"I don't know. I was going through his files. I thought I

might find something that would give me an idea who killed him. I'm for Elma Vassos, and I think you're lying when you say you are. You came here with *her*." He aimed a finger at Frances Cox. "She a liar too. She lied to the police."

"Can you prove it?"

"No. But I know her."

"Watch it. She'll sue you for slander. Did you find anything helpful in Ashby's files?"

"No."

"Since you're an officer of the corporation, why did you scoot to the hall when you heard footsteps?"

"Because I thought it was her. I was coming back in this way to see what she was up to."

"Okay. You're wrong about Nero Wolfe and me, but time will tell. Frisking me will be easier with my hands up." I put them up. "If you tickle, the deal's off."

He wasn't as clumsy as you would expect, and he didn't miss a pocket. He even flipped through my notebook. With some practise he would have made a good dipper. When he was through he said all right and returned to his chair and I put on my coat and went to the door; and there was Miss Cox with her coat and stole on. Evidently she was seeing me out of the building. Not a word had passed between her and Busch

since she had said, "Oh, it's you," and no more than necessary between her and me.

I opened the door and followed her through, and at the elevator she pressed the button, touched my sleeve with fingertips, and said, "I'm thirsty," in a voice I hadn't thought she had in her. It was unquestionably a come-on.

"Have a heart," I said. "First Busch is suddenly a bulldog, and now you're suddenly a siren. I'm being crowded."

"Not you." The same voice. "I'm no siren. It's just that I've realized what you're like—or what you may be like. I'm curious, and when a girl's curious . . . I only said I'm thirsty. Aren't you?"

I put a fingertip under her nice chin, tilted her head back, and took in her eyes. "Panting," I said, and the elevator came.

An hour and ten minutes later, at a corner table at Charley's Grill, I decided I had wasted \$7 of Wolfe's money, including tip. Her takeoff had been fine, but she hadn't maintained altitude. After only a couple of sips of the first drink she had said, "What was that about asking Andy Busch once before why he was here? Where? I didn't know you had met."

I don't mind being foxed by an expert, it's how you learn;

but that was an insult. I hung on, quenching her thirst with Wolfe's money and no expense account for a client's bill, as long as there was a chance of getting something useful out of her, then I put her in a taxi and gave my lungs a dose of fresh cold December air by walking home. It was 11:30 as I mounted the seven steps of the stoop; Wolfe would probably be in bed.

He wasn't. There were voices in the office as I put my coat and hat on the rack—voices I recognized, and the click of my typewriter. I proceeded down the hall and entered. Wolfe was at his desk. Elma was at my desk, typing. Saul Panzer was in the red leather chair, and Fred Durkin was in one of the yellow ones. I stood. No one had a glance for me. Wolfe was speaking.

" . . . but the sooner the better, naturally. It must be conclusive enough for me, and through me for the police, but not necessarily for a judge and jury. You will phone every hour or so whether or not you have got anything; one of you may need the other. Archie will be out much of the day; he will be with Miss Vassos arranging for the burial of her father and attending to it; but the usual restrictions regarding nine to eleven in the morning and four to

six in the afternoon will not apply.

"Call as soon as you have something to report. I want to settle this matter as soon as possible. Whatever you must disburse can't be helped, but it will be my money; it will not be billed to anyone. Have that in mind. Archie, give them each five hundred dollars."

As I went and opened the safe and pulled out the cash reserve drawer I was remarking to myself that that sounded more lavish than it actually was, since it would be deductible as business expense. Even if they shelled it all out the net loss would be about two Cs of the grand. Of course there would also be their pay—\$10 an hour for Saul Panzer, the best free-lance operative this side of outer space, and \$7.50 an hour for Fred Durkin, who wasn't in Saul's class but was way above average.

By the time I had it counted, in used fives, tens, and twenties, Saul and Fred were on their feet, ready to go, the briefing apparently finished. As I handed them the lettuce I told Wolfe I had a sketch of the Mercer's Bobbins office if that would help them, and he said it wouldn't. I said it might be useful for them to know that I had found Andrew Busch in Ashby's room, hoping, according to him,

to find something that would give him an idea about who had killed Ashby, and Wolfe said it wasn't.

Evidently I had nothing to contribute except my services as an escort for Saul and Fred to the door, opening it, and closing it after them, which I supplied, with appropriate exchanges between old friends and colleagues. When I returned to the office, Wolfe was out of his chair but Elma was still at the typewriter. I handed him the sketch, and he looked it over.

He handed it back. "Satisfactory. Who let you in?"

"Miss Cox. Shall I report, or have you gone on ahead with Saul and Fred?"

"Report."

I did so, and he listened, but when I had finished he merely nodded. No questions. He told me Miss Vassos was typing the substance of a conversation she had had with him, said good night, and went out to his elevator. Elma turned to say she was nearly through and did I want to read it, and I took it and sat in the red leather chair.

It was four pages, double-spaced, not margined my way, but nice and clean, no erasing or exing out, and it was all about her father—or rather, what her father had told her at various times about his cus-

tomers at Mercer's Bobbins, and one who hadn't been a customer, Frances Cox. Apparently he had told her a lot, part fact and part opinion.

DENNIS ASHBY. Pete hadn't thought much of him except as a steady source of a dollar and a quarter a week. When Elma had told him that Ashby was responsible for pulling the firm out of the hole it had been in, Pete had said maybe he had been lucky. I have already reported his reaction when Elma told him that Ashby had asked her to dinner and a show, and now add that he said that if she got into trouble with such a man as Ashby she was no daughter of his anyway.

JOHN MERCER. Not as steady a customer as Ashby, since he spent part of his days at the factory in New Jersey, but Pete was all for him. A gentleman and a real American. However, Elma said, her father had been very grateful to Mercer because he had given her a good job just because Pete asked him to.

ANDREW BUSCH. Pete's verdict on Busch had varied from week to week. Before Elma had started to work there he had— But what's the use? This was what Elma saw fit to report of what her father had said about a man who had asked her to marry him just yesterday. That affects a girl's attitude.

What she had put in was probably straight enough, but what had she left out?

PHILIP HORAN. Nothing. Elma corroborated Horan. Pete had never shined Horan's shoes and had probably never seen him.

FRANCES COX. I got the feeling that Elma had toned it down some, but even so it was positively thumbs down. The general impression was that Miss Cox was a high-nose and a female baboon. Evidently she had never turned siren on him.

"I don't see what good this is," Elma said as we collated the original and carbons. "He asked me a thousand questions about what my father said about them."

"Search me," I told her. "I just work here. If it comes to me in a dream, I'll tell you in the morning."

At the moment, 3:30 Friday afternoon, that Saul Panzer was finding what Pete Vassos had scrawled on a rock with his finger dipped in his blood, I was at the curb in front of a church on Cedar Street, Greek Orthodox, getting into a rented limousine with Elma Vassos and three friends of hers. The hearse, with the coffin in it, was just ahead, and we were going to follow it to a cemetery somewhere on the edge of

Brooklyn. I had offered to drive us in the sedan, which was Wolfe's in name but mine in practice, but no, it had to be a black limousine.

I had asked Elma if she wanted the stack of dollar bills from the safe, but she said she would pay for her father's funeral herself, so apparently she had some put away.

I wouldn't have been jolly even if it had been a wedding instead of a funeral, with Saul and Fred somewhere doing something, I had no idea where or what, and me spending the day convoying, on her personal errands, a girl on whom I had no designs, private or professional. The idea, according to Wolfe when I had gone up to his room at 8:30 A.M. for instructions, was that it would be risky to let her go anywhere unattended.

If I would prefer, I could get an operative to escort her and I could stay in the office to stand by. He knew damn well what I would prefer, to join Saul and Fred, and I knew damn well he wouldn't be blowing \$17.50 an hour plus expenses if he hadn't had a healthy notion that he was going to get something for it. But we had had that argument time and again, and there would have been no point in repeating it, especially when he was at breakfast.

So I spent the day bodyguarding, and it didn't help much that the body I was guarding was 110 pounds of attractive female with a sad little face. I have nothing against sympathy when my mind is free, but it wasn't. It was with Saul and Fred, and that was very frustrating because I didn't know where they were. No doubt Elma's friends got the impression that I was a fish.

When we finally got back to Manhattan and the friends had been dropped off at their addresses, and the rented limousine stopped in front of the old brownstone, it was after six o'clock. Elma paid the driver. Mounting the stoop with her and finding that the door wasn't bolted, I knew that at least nothing had blown up, but, stepping inside, I saw that someone had blown in.

There on the hall rack were objects I recognized: a brown wool cap, a gray hat, a blue hat, and three coats. As I took Elma's coat I told her, "Go up and lie down. There's company in the office. Inspector Cramer, Saul Panzer, and Fred Durkin."

"But what—why are they—"

"The Lord only knows, or maybe Mr. Wolfe does. You're all in. If you want—"

Her look stopped me. She was facing the door. I turned. There on the stoop was John Mercer,

with a finger on the bell button, with Frances Cox and Philip Horan behind him. I told Elma to beat it and waited until she had turned up the stairs to open the door.

So Wolfe thought he had it. I wondered, as I let them in and took their things and sent them to the office. More than once I had seen him risk it when all he had hold of was the tip of the tail, even with a big fee at stake, and with no intake but a dollar bill already spent and then some—he could be trying it with no hold at all.

He knew I was home, since Saul had appeared at the office door when the bell had rung and had seen me admitting the guests, and I had a notion to go to the kitchen and sit down with a glass of milk. If I joined the party I would be merely a spectator, and it might be a bum show. But while I was considering it another guest appeared on the stoop. Andrew Busch. I had the door open before he pressed the button.

Since I had crossed him off and I thought Wolfe had too, his coming meant there would be a real showdown, all or nothing, so I took him to the office and followed him in. And found that it was the full cast: Joan Ashby was on the couch at the left of my desk, with a mink coat, presumably not paid

for, draped on her shoulders. Cramer was in the red leather chair. Saul and Fred were over by the big globe. Mercer, Horan, and Miss Cox were on yellow chairs in a row facing Wolfe's desk, and there was a vacant one waiting for Busch.

As I circled around the chairs, Wolfe told Busch he was late, and Busch said something, and, as I sat, Cramer said he wanted Elma Vassos there.

Wolfe shook his head. "You are here by sufferance, Mr. Cramer, and you will either listen or leave, as agreed. As I told you on the phone, you can't expect to interfere in your official capacity, since you have closed your investigation of the only death by violence in your jurisdiction that these people are connected with. Or you *had* closed it. You agreed to listen or leave. Do you want to leave?"

"Go ahead," Cramer growled. "But Elma Vassos ought to be here."

"She's at hand if needed." Wolfe's eyes left him. "Mr. Mercer. I told *you* on the phone that if you would bring Miss Cox and Mr. Horan I thought we could come to an understanding about the actions Miss Vassos has brought. It seemed desirable for Mrs. Ashby and Mr. Busch to be present, and I asked them to come. I'm on bet-

ter ground than I was yesterday. Then I only knew that Mr. Vassos had not killed Dennis Ashby; now I know who did. I'll tell you briefly—"

Cramer cut in. "*Now* I'm here officially! Now you're saying you can name a murderer! How did you know Vassos hadn't killed Ashby?"

Wolfe glared at him. "I have your word. Listen or leave."

"I'll listen to your answer to my question!"

"I was about to give it." Wolfe turned to the others. "I was saying, I'll tell you briefly how I knew that. Miss Vassos came to me Tuesday evening to engage my services. She said that someone had lied to the police about her; that the police were persuaded that she had been seduced by Ashby and her father had found out about it and had killed Ashby and then himself; that none of that was true; that her father had told her I was the greatest man in the world; that she wanted to hire me to discover and establish the truth; and in payment she would give me all the dollar bills, some five hundred, I had paid her father for shining my shoes over a period of more than three years."

He turned a palm up. "Very well. If she had in fact misbehaved, and if her misbehavior had been responsible

for her father's committing murder and suicide, what on earth could possibly have impelled her to come to me—the greatest man in the world to her father, and therefore a man not to be hoodwinked—and offer me what was for her a substantial sum to learn the truth and expose it? It was inconceivable. So I believed her."

He turned his hand back over. "But I won't pretend that I was moved to act by the dollar bills, by the pathos of Miss Vassos' predicament, or by a passion for truth and justice. I was moved by pique. Monday afternoon, the day before Miss Vassos came, Mr. Cramer had told me I was capable of shielding a murderer in order to avoid the inconvenience of finding another bootblack; and the next day, Wednesday, he told Mr. Goodwin that I had been beguiled by a harlot and ejected Mr. Goodwin from his office. That's why—"

"I didn't eject him!"

Wolfe ignored it. "That's why Mr. Cramer is here. I could have asked the District Attorney to send someone, but I preferred to have Mr. Cramer present."

"I'm here and I'm listening," Cramer rasped.

Wolfe turned to him. "Yes, sir. I'll pass over the actions at law I advised Miss Vassos to

bring; that was merely a ruse to make contact. I needed to see these people. I already had a strong hint about the murderer. So had you."

"If you mean a hint about somebody besides Vassos, you're wrong. I hadn't."

"You had. I gave it to you, half of it, or Mr. Goodwin did, when he reported verbatim my conversation with Mr. Vassos on Monday morning. He said he saw someone. He said that he had only said *if* he told a cop he saw someone, but it was obvious that he actually *had* seen someone. Also he told his daughter that evening that there was something he hadn't told either me or the police, and he was going to come and tell me in the morning and ask me what he ought to do; and he wouldn't tell his daughter what it was. Surely that's a strong hint."

"Hint of what?"

"That he knew, or thought he knew, who had killed Ashby. Where and when he had seen someone can only be conjectured, but it is highly probable that he had seen someone leaving Ashby's room. Not entering; you know the times involved as well as I do, or better; he must have seen him leaving, at a moment which made it likely that he had been in that room when Ashby left it by the win-

dow. And it was someone whom he did not want to expose, for whom he had affection or regard, or who had put him under obligation.

"There I have the advantage of you. Mr. Vassos and I had formed the habit, while he was shining my shoes, of discussing the history of ancient Greece and the men who made it, and I knew the bent of his mind. He was tolerant of violence and even ferocity, and the qualities he most strongly condemned were ingratitude and disloyalty. That was, of course, not decisive, but it helped."

Wolfe wiggled a finger. "So. The person, call him X, whom Mr. Vassos had seen in compromising circumstances and who was probably the murderer, was one who had earned his affection, his high regard, his gratitude, or his loyalty." He left Cramer and surveyed the others. "Was it one of you? That was the point of my questions yesterday afternoon when you were here, and of a discussion I had with Miss Vassos last evening. It isn't necessary to elaborate; as you know, only one of you qualifies.

"You, Mr. Mercer. You fit admirably; Mr. Vassos owed you gratitude for giving his daughter a job. By which door were you leaving Ashby's room when he saw you, the one to

the outer hall or the other?"

"Neither one." Wolfe had telegraphed the punch, and Mercer had got set. "You're not intimating that I killed Dennis Ashby. Are you?"

"I am indeed." Wolfe turned to Cramer. "The question of which door isn't vital, but the inner one is more likely. You are of course familiar with the arrangement. If Mr. Mercer left by the door to the outer hall after killing Ashby, he would have had to get back in through the reception room and would have been seen by Miss Cox and anyone else who happened to be there. The other way, there was a good chance of being seen by no one, and he was seen only by Mr. Vassos, who had just entered the reception room and been nodded in by Miss Cox."

"You say," Cramer growled, "so far, damn little. I'm still listening."

Wolfe nodded. "I thought it proper to explain what directed my attention to Mr. Mercer. After my talk last evening with Miss Vassos I called in Saul Panzer and Fred Durkin. You know them. Mr. Goodwin wouldn't be available today. There was a possibility that Mr. Mercer was not the only likely candidate, that there was someone in another office in that building who qualified

—whom Mr. Vassos would have been reluctant to expose and who might have had a motive for killing Ashby. Mr. Durkin's job—"

"Did Mercer have a motive?"

"I'll come to that. Confound it, don't interrupt! Mr. Durkin's job was to explore that possibility, and he has spent the day at it. No negative can be established beyond question, but he found no one who met the specifications; and he got some suggestive information. On the sixth floor of that building is a firm which is the chief competitor of Mercer's Bobbins, and its president told Mr. Durkin that Ashby's death was a blow to him because he had been discussing with him the possibility of Ashby's coming to his firm and they had been approaching agreement on terms.

"It could be that man had been so harassed by a competitor that he had killed him, but he fails the other test. He had never had his shoes shined by Mr. Vassos. Only two people in that office had, and only occasionally, and neither of them had put him under any obligation of affection or gratitude or loyalty."

Wolfe took a breath. His eyes stayed on Cramer. "Before calling on Mr. Panzer, I'll dispose of Miss Vassos. Your information about her came from three

sources, and probably you would have tested them further if her father had not died as he did outside your jurisdiction; but even so you are open to a charge of nonfeasance. Miss Cox and Mr. Mercer gave Ashby as *their* source, and he was dead. Were they lying?

"Mercer's reason for lying is of course manifest, since he had himself killed both Ashby and Mr. Vassos. As for Miss Cox, Ashby may have boasted to her of a feather he had not in fact gathered, or she may be a born liar, or she—pfui. She's a woman. Pry it out of her when you have nothing better to do. As for—"

"I still believe it," Frances Cox said, loud. Her chin was thrust forward.

Wolfe didn't give her a glance. "As for Mr. Horan, you know, of course, that he coveted Ashby's job. He has refused to name the source of his information. He may have been lying, or he may have himself been misled. That's immaterial now; I'll move to what *is* material. Saul?"

Saul Panzer got up, went to Mercer's chair, and stood behind it, facing Cramer. There was nothing about him to catch the eye; he looked just ordinary, but people who had dealt with him knew better, and Cramer was one of them.

"My job," he said, "was to check on John Mercer for Monday evening. Mr. Wolfe's theory was that he knew Vassos had seen him leaving Ashby's room that morning, and that evening he phoned him and arranged to meet him. They met, and Mercer had a car, and he drove across the river to Jersey and to a place he knew about. He slugged Vassos with something, stunned him, or killed him, and pushed him over the edge of the cliff. That was the theory, and—"

"To hell with the theory," Cramer snapped. "What did you get?"

"I was lucky. I couldn't start at Mercer's end, for instance at the garage where he kept his car, because I had no in. So I went to Graham Street to try to find someone who had seen Vassos leaving the house that evening. You know how that is, Inspector, you can spend a week at it and come out empty, but I was lucky. Within an hour I had it.

"Mr. Wolfe has told me to keep the details for later, since Mercer is here and listening, but I have the names and addresses of three people who saw Vassos get into a car at the corner of Graham Street and Avenue A on Monday evening a little before nine o'clock. There was only one person in the car,

the man driving it, and they can describe him. Then I—”

“Did you describe him for them?”

“No. I’m dry behind the ears, Inspector. Then I wasted an hour trying to pick up the car this side of the river. Then I got my car and drove to Jersey and spent two hours trying to pick up the car at that end. I found a law officer I know, a state man, and he went with me to the cliff. After looking around at the top and finding nothing useful, but it ought to be gone over right, we climbed down to where Vassos’ body was found. That should be gone over too, better than it has been, but we found one thing that shouldn’t have been missed by a Boy Scout.

“Vassos hadn’t been dead when Mercer pushed him over. He died after he reached the bottom, and before he died he dipped his finger in his blood and printed M, E, R, C, on a rock. It wasn’t very distinct, and there was more blood around, but it should have been noticed. It’s still there and is now being protected. The state man is a good officer, and it will be there. I went to a phone and called Mr. Wolfe and he told me to come in. Of course I had already reported what I had found at Graham Street.”

Cramer had come forward in

his chair. “Did you and the state man climb down together?” he demanded.

Saul smiled. His smile is as tender as he is tough, and it helps to make him the best poker player I know. “With the blood four days old? How could I? Jab myself in the leg and use some of mine, nice and fresh? And it might not match.”

“I want the names and addresses of those three people.” Cramer stood up. “And I want to use the phone.”

“No,” Wolfe snapped. “Not until you have taken Mr. Mercer into custody. Look at him. If he is allowed to walk out of here, he might do anything. Besides, I haven’t finished. After getting a report from Mr. Durkin this afternoon, I phoned Mrs. Ashby.” He looked at her. “Will you tell Mr. Cramer what you told me?”

I didn’t turn to see her, back of me on the couch, because that would have taken my eyes away from Mercer. But I heard her. “I told you that my husband hadn’t decided whether to leave Mercer’s Bobbins or not. He had told Mr. Mercer that he would stay if he got fifty-one per cent of the stock of the corporation, and if he didn’t get it he would go to another firm. Just last week he told him he had to know by the end of the month.”

"He told me the same thing," Frances Cox said, loud. "He said if he left he wanted to take me with him. I've thought all along that probably Mr. Mercer killed him." She was a real prize, that Cox girl. She was going on. "But I didn't say so because I had no real—"

Mercer stopped her. His idea was to stop her by getting his fingers around her throat, but he didn't quite make it because Saul was there. But he was fast enough and strong enough, in spite of his age, to make a stir. Cramer came on the bound, Joan Ashby let out a scream, Horan scrambled up, knocking his chair over, and of course I was there.

For the first time in my life I saw a man frothing at the mouth, and I wouldn't care to see it again. The line of foam seeping through Mercer's lips, as Saul pinned him from behind, was exactly the color of his hair.

"All right, Panzer," Cramer said. "I'll take him."

I looked away and became aware that we were shy a guest. Andrew Busch had disappeared. He didn't know which room was Elma's, and he would probably barge into Wolfe's room, so I went out to the stairs and on up.

At the first landing a glance showed me that the door of Wolfe's room was closed, so I kept going. At the second landing the door of the South Room was standing open, and I went to it. Elma, over by a window, saw me, but Busch's back was to me. He was talking.

"... so it's all right, everything's all right, and that Nero Wolfe is the greatest man in the world. I've already asked you if you'll marry me, so I won't ask you again right now, but I just want to say..."

I turned and headed for the stairs. He may have been a good office manager, but as a promoter he had a lot to learn. The darned fool was standing ten feet away from her. That is not the way to do it.

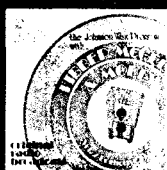
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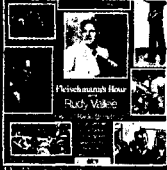
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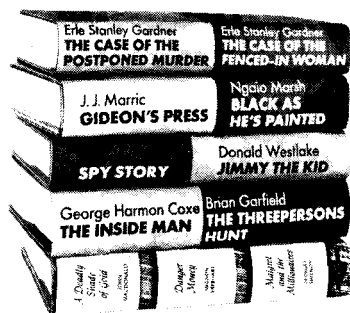
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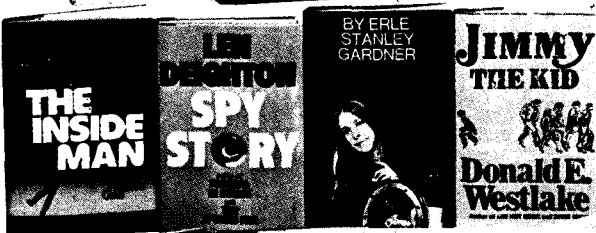
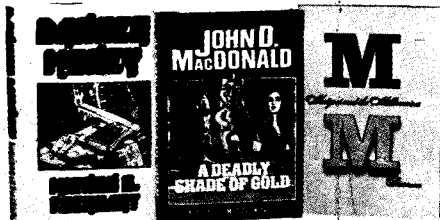
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